circular motion by bentleys

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Summary:

In 1958 seven children clasped their bloody hands together and promised -- swore to each other and to the universe -- to hold their bond close and to come back to each other if the need arose. They *forgot,* truly and deeply they forgot, but that bond remained, across distance and time and the dark curse of Derry. Those seven children were, really, sort of like soulmates.

(So it was a good thing that the magic of soul-marks was real and true, right?)

[Soulmate!AU re-imagining of Stephen King's IT; Eventual Fix-It; Losers-Ensemble Cast]

1. 1959

Notes for the Chapter:

> Essentially this fic is an AU based off the novel, but adapted by me based on what I like/dislike about it. It's set in 1958/1985; but some themes, characterizations, and plot elements are (and may later be) drawn from the films/any other adaptation I feel like engaging with. My intention is also for it to be understandable/readable without having read the book, although I don't know how successfully I've achieved that. (But there's plenty of similarities between the various IT canons, ya get the basics!)

> Content warnings: generally the same or lessor as in the source material(s), but I'll try to point out anything specific on a chapter-to-chapter basis. Overall, to put it as simply as possible: no slurs or explicit detailings of say, hate crimes, but there are intimations of the various oppressive factors that the Losers face.

“The LORD GOD said, “It is not good for a man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.” (Genesis 2:18; JPS)

“Oh how my heart yearns for you.” (‘Peggy Sue’; J. Allison, N. Petty)

1959

I. Richie Tozier Finds His Soulmate

Richie was eleven years old when his soul-mark appeared. This was neither particularly early or particularly late for a soul-mark, and it appeared in a conveniently discreet place, curved over the bone that jutted out of his hip. He touched the mark, and the skin there was hot (like he’d always read it would be) but it didn’t hurt to press (he’d heard that too, but hadn’t really believed it).

There was no particular reason he did not make this information immediately public. It was simply that, while Richie liked to run his mouth, he also felt that what was private was *private*, and needn't be shared around like the latest drug-store comic.

It was his secret; a new curious fact known only to him. In a way he was like a character in said comic-book, with a secret power or something and -- after the events of the summer of 1958 -- it was sort of nice to have something that he kept to himself *without* it feeling like a horrible weight pushing down on him.

He *did* want to know who it was. The things about soul-marks was that they were -- even in the scientific age of the 20th century -- still so *unknown*. They could appear before you met your soulmate, or after, or you could never meet them at all, because they died or something morbid like that. So he wanted to know, but in a vague sense -- he wanted the knowledge in the same way he curiously wondered where he'd live in the future (*not Derry, Hell, not Maine -- no way José* --), but he had no plan about actually trying to figure it out. If he had a soulmate, he'd have to marry her, right? His mom and dad got married and then they had kids and now his dad went to work and paid boys two and a half dollars to mow the lawn and Jesus himself knew Richie was not anywhere near ready for *that*.

So. No harm in waiting, then.

Life had other plans for Richie Tozier, though, and -- as the river flows -- he saw who his soulmate was not three weeks after his own mark first appeared.

One of the only rules of soul-marks that was universally acknowledged was that both of the partners would manifest the mark at the same time, no matter where they were or what they were feeling or not feeling. So Richie was aware that, whoever she was, she'd probably already seen her own mark, and that was kind of weird -- did girls look at their own bodies the way Richie looked at his?

He was thinking about this in the Barrens, trailing a few steps behind

Eddie and Ben as they wandered towards the clubhouse. Richie was ignoring their conversation in favor of contemplating whether to ask Beverly if girls looked at themselves. He was pretty sure that she'd make fun of him for the question, but it *was* for his soulmate, so…

"Wow!" Ben's voice cut into his internal debate. "Hey! It worked just like I thought."

Richie looked down to see that he was referring to the drainage creek-slash-protective moat he and Bill had been talking about building to add an extra layer of protection around their clubhouse. An obvious enough idea, but Eddie had still been on-edge from the incident with the dam. The results were in, though; there was now, essentially, a lovely ol' moat that stretched around the perimeter of what was undeniably their territory.

"Huh," said Richie, "Maybe ya shoulda thought to build a bridge, too, Haystack." Richie puffed up his chest and swept an arm out towards his friends, deepening his voice in his best frontiersman impression, "Well *boooys*! How're we gonna ford this here roarin' rapids, huh? *Huh?* "

Eddie and Ben responded to this new Voice with well-practiced indifference. "It wouldn't be too hard to put together a makeshift bridge from this side," Ben said, thoughtfully, already looking around for supplies. Richie rolled his eyes. He was *not* gonna get stuck playing construction worker on a day so full of possibilities!

"Cowards, th' lot of ya!" He'd kind of lost the plot on what accent he was going for, but that wasn't important. He bounded forward, hopping from foot to foot as he tugged his shoes off.

"Less- *go* ! A real man isn't stopped by such paltry things!" He rolled his trousers up as far as he could get them, and tied his shoelaces together to loop his shoes around his neck. Good fortune that he'd worn lace-ups today! Blessed Providence! He laughed, and started to take a step forward, only to be snagged by a small hand.

The hand belonged to Eddie. "Whaaat?" Richie complained. In just his regular voice, now.

“You’re gonna go in there barefoot? You’re gonna cut your feet open!”

Richie rolled his eyes. “On what, the mud? I helped dig it, remember?”

“The stream could’ve carried rocks and things down with it,” Ben said reasonably but unhelpfully.

“See!”

“Man must conquer nature and likewise his own fears,” Richie said, solemnly, and then he climbed into the stream.

The water was flowing faster than he expected, but the mud was soft but sturdy against his feet. He turned towards his friends, and grinned.

“Come on in, boys! The water’s *grrreat!* ”

He had them at that, he knew it. Logic couldn’t stop *fun*. Almost immediately, Ben laughed and sat down to pull off his own shoes and socks. Eddie scowled at the both of them. “Fine!” he said. “But I’m not taking off my shoes!”

“Well, if you wanna explain to Mama Kaspbrak why her baby’s shoes are all muddy, that’s your choice…”

“Shut up!” was all Eddie could come up with to that, and Ben and Richie both laughed at him a little. There was something fundamentally hilarious about Eddie painstakingly rolling his corduroys up over his knees while his stark white socks were about to get soaked by muddy storm-water. He climbed in gingerly, and Richie thrust a stick he’d grabbed into the air like it was a staff, shouting “Onwards Christian soldiers!” as he let them upstream. Ben laughed behind him, and then said, “Wow, the walls are holding up pretty well.”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it, you’re a genius…”

“It’s *cold* in here,” Eddie complained from their tail end. “Can’t we just cross!”

“Wouldn’t wanna ruin your shoes too much, right?” Richie grinned, but Eddie was right -- the water was cold and Richie was well-aware that he was not *actually* a hardy-tough-macho frontiersman.

“If we must,” Richie said. “Lead the way, Eds.”

“Don’t,” Eddie said, sharply, at the nickname, and then he climbed swiftly up the band and back onto dry land.

When it came down to it, it was only by coincidence that Richie saw it at all. He kept thinking about that, *after,* how he could’ve missed it, and then maybe it would’ve been a while for his next opportunity to glance at it, and the Spring of 1959 could’ve felt so different.

But he had been watching Eddie for his reaction to ‘Eds’, so he was looking, and Eddie took a big step up, and there was --

there was a little silver mark on the back of his leg. Right above the bend of his knee. It was shaped like a bridge, with a little circle each above and below it, and it looked exactly -- absolutely fucking exactly -- like the one on Richie’s hip.

What? thought Richie. *Hey, what? Huh?*

Eddie climbed the rest of the way and there it was again -- clear as day -- impossible to miss it once you knew what you were looking for.

Eds? Richie thought.

“Are you guys coming or *what?*” Eddie said, hands on his hips. Ben was stepping forward, but Richie was just standing there like an idiot. He bit down harshly onto his own tongue to prevent him from letting it run amok and do something real dumb like tell Eddie what he’d just realized, in front of Ben and God.

“Yeah, I’m comin’, hold your *horses*,” he said, and if any of the Losers noticed he was more sedate than usual for the rest of the day, they must’ve counted it as a blessing and moved on.

The day after Eddie and Bill arrived together and when the got to the moat Ben and Richie were already hard at work constructing the bridge -- Eddie had laughed at that.

“I thought the water was great, Richie! What happened to Man vs. Nature?”

Richie had scowled. “*Shaddup*...I’m such a good guy that I gotta show support for my weaker friends, right?”

“Sure, sure,” Eddie said, nodding wisely but ruining it by grinning. “Let me give you a hand with that, Richie.” And then both sets of their small shoulders had borne the weight of the boards, and Richie had spent long afternoon hours thinking about everything and nothing.

II. Beverly Marsh Hears a Secret

The Spring winds hadn’t yet turned warm, but it was still a nice night out. The stars above Beverly Marsh and Richie Tozier were bright pinpricks in the sky. It had been cloudy for several days and it was like she was looking at a new sky now, constellations finally visible again. There was nothing in particular that was special about this tree in Memorial Park, but it sort of felt like there was -- maybe because it was an imposing tree during the daytime, and it was after dark. Not *late* after dark, mind, her parents still worried, and she suspected that the Toziers thought their son was still his room instead of lying in a slightly damp patch of grass. The murders were over, though, and it was like the people of Derry were...forgetting.

Even *she* forgot things, sometimes, but then she’d see her friends’ faces and feel that tight pang of *them*, of the Losers-as-a-unit. And she’d remember everything, even the parts she didn’t really want to.

“I have a mark,” Richie said. His voice was just a thin whisper in the

grass.

She'd been waiting for him to speak -- he was obviously working up to it -- but that wasn't what Beverly had been expecting. She wasn't sure what she *had* been expecting, though. "Yeah?" she said, tentatively.

Richie paused, blowing smoke out of his mouth. He was trying to learn how to make rings, but he couldn't do it yet.

"It's on my hip," he said. "Which is great, right? 'Cause then no one can see it." He stopped again. He was obviously stalling, and she waited him out.

"The thing is," Richie Tozier admitted to her, while grass pricked at both their backs and the smoke from their twin cigarettes mingled above them, "I *know* who my soulmate it. I've seen the mark."

"Okay," she said. She still didn't quite understand her role in this conversation. She wondered if Richie was about to tell her his soulmate was Greta Bowie, or one of the other girls who could be so cruel to her.

"It's Eddie," Richie said, in a terrible, quiet voice.

What? her mind produced.

"What?" Beverly said.

"You know," Richie said, vaguely, like he wasn't talking to her, just thinking aloud. "Some people say -- 'cause you know, not everyone gets a soulmate -- and even those who *do* , sometimes the soulmate is just friends."

"Right," she said, uneasy. She'd never seen a soul-mark in real life. Soul-marks happened in books and in movies and TV shows, not in actual everyday living. Not to her *friends*.

"So it's --" Richie said. "So it's okay. If Eddie is my…you know. "

Beverly didn't know what to say. If it wasn't just friends, that would be a whole 'nother thing entirely, she knew that…her father talked

enough about it, and she heard other people say things, too. She wasn't an expert but she thought she'd never have reasons to wield the words those people hefted at her friends, no matter what.

She stayed quiet, and so did Richie, for a long, uncharacteristic moment.

"But." he said, finally. He had finished his cigarette, and stamped out the stub on the dirt. "I don't think Eddie is my *friend* soulmate. I think he's my...soulmate. Just that."

But it wasn't just that, she thought. *Oh, Richie…* Because if that was true it would mean all sorts of things were true. Oh, Hell. She was in over her head.

"Why are you telling me this?" she said, quietly. She didn't know how she was meant to react.

"I don't know," Richie said. "It's only that I couldn't tell the other guys. I just couldn't."

She could understand that much, at least. The tension of gender, of boys-and-girls...it was there, in the Losers, whether she liked it or not (and she didn't much like it --)

"I don't know what to say, Richie," she said.

He shrugged, his back arching in the long grass. "Yeah. Sorry." He was so disconcertingly calm, soft-spoken. All of a sudden she longed very keenly for him to make a stupid joke and carry away the silence, take the weight of speaking off her back.

But it was clear to her that tonight it was Richie who needed her support. He was usually so unflagging; always valiantly pretending that he had his emotional responses pressed tight under his thumb; but tonight he was telling her something he'd never told another person. Her heart fluttered wildly under her breast, and she felt a deep fondness for her friend.

"I think you're good, Richie Tozier," she said, carefully. "I mean… you're too loud and too rude and really annoying sometimes --" (it was a mark of how closely Richie was listening that he did not

protest) -- “You are all those things but you’re my friend, too. I don’t have that many of those...so thank you.” She was peeling something of herself up, with that admission -- that she had some driving need was difficult enough to admit, but that it was emotional closeness itself that she craved -- Beverly was a child still and couldn’t think about it as an adult, but she could feel the thick, adult, *weight* of it, all the same.

“Wonder if he would think that,” Richie muttered, into the night, and despite her reassurances, all Beverly could think was, *I hope nobody else ever finds out; I hope Derry never knows you, Richie Tozier.* She knew that it was a dangerous thing indeed, to be known. And if Richie was -- well.

She had another cigarette tucked into her blouse, and she offered it to Richie, even though she’d never seen him smoke more than once in a day’s span.

“Thanks, Bevvie,” he said, and she struck at her matchbox for the second time that night; looked Richie in the eye as the tiny flame curled into the darkness. She still didn’t know what he needed, or if she could give it at all.

III. Stanley Uris Tells a Story

It was different if a boy knew. Richie Tozier couldn’t articulate to himself how so, but it simply *was*; he understood this as easily as he understood any other fact of life.

But -- the thing was, Stan would know about soulmates. He’d already talked to Beverly but she hadn’t known much in particular because she was uneasy with the concept herself; Richie was no shrink but the fact of that was simple enough to uncover. (He was pretending he didn't know that about her at all. The admission had been hard, pretending he hadn't done it was easy.) Stan, however, was a *romantic.*

Oh, he was quiet enough about it. But Richie saw the way his smile tucked up when he saw a romantic scene in a movie, or read one in a book. Stan was the sort of man who would grow up to have a wife and children and a little house with a fence, and Richie could poke fun of that all day but it also meant that if any of their little gang knew about soul-marks, it'd be him.

"Stan!" Richie crowed. He didn't feel very much like crowing, or even making jokes. He felt that if he let himself talk like normal, all sorts of secrets would come tumbling out like a stuck tap that couldn't be turned off. "Stan the Man! Where're you off to now, huh?"

Stan was holding a pair of binoculars, and he sighed and raised them, like it was obvious. (Probably he did this because it was, in fact, obvious).

"Bird-watching," he said. "You can't come."

"Didn't want to anyway!" Richie said, unbothered. "I still don't know what makes birds so int'resting. It's not like in a film where they might do something cool. They mostly just sit around, in real life."

"You wouldn't understand," Stan said with the easy patience of someone who'd defended his interests countless times, and had eventually given up trying to convince anyone else of their worth.

"Surely I wouldn't," Richie said, easily enough. "Look, I won't keep ya, Stan-the-Man, and I promise I won't scare your birdies off. I just wanna walk with you, yeah?"

"All right," Stan said, looking uneasy. "But I'm not answering any more questions about my dad."

"Not about your dad, Stanley," Richie said. "He's boring anyway. It's about *me*, a far more important topic."

That made Stan laugh a little, and some of the tension between them eased. Stan started off down the road, and Richie slipped into an easy pace beside him.

"So," Richie said, after giving Stan a minute or two in which to feel safe. "You got a soul-mark, Stanley?"

That got a big reaction -- bigger than you'd expect from Stan, unless you really *knew* him, Richie thought smugly. Stan veered a bit to the side, and then looked back sharply. "A soul-mark?"

"Yeah. A sign of your God-ordained soulmate, a symbol of undying love… all that bull-hockey. Ya got one?"

Stan peered at Richie. Richie let his eyes flit away from the stare, whipping off his glasses and furiously polishing them on his grimy shirt. Without them, Stan was just a mass of colors and spots, and largely non-threatening.

"Do Jews have soul-marks, even? 'Cause you know, the reverend at my church says --"

Stan sighed, and Richie cut himself off, and shoved his glasses back on. *Beep-beep, asshole. Don't be a dickwad. Stan's your lifeline, here.*

"Sorry," he said. His inflection even approached sincerity. "I just -- uh."

Stan sighed again. Then he said, softly. "I don't have one. Yet."

"But ya want one."

"I guess so."

"'Cause it's *romantic.* "

"My parents are soulmates," Stan said. He sighed again. Richie felt kinda bad for making him sigh so much. He sounded like an old man. "It doesn't mean you'll be happy all the time or anything. But I…" he glanced sidelong at Richie. "Well, I don't know. I want it."

Richie kicked aggressively at a rock on the side of the road. He watched it roll away into the underbrush. "You want it, I got it, Stan the Man."

Stan stopped stock-still. "You have a mark?"

Richie kept walking forward for a few feet. There were so many convenient reasons not to look Stan in the eye. "Yup," he said, not

turning around.

“But Richie,” Stan said, jogging forward -- and boy howdy, Richie could feel the excitement just radiating right off him -- “Do you know who it is? Are you gonna tell her? Did you *already* tell her?”

Richie swallowed. Here came the hard part. “Yup,” he said. “I know who it is. And nope! I haven’t said a thing.”

“But Richie!” Stan said again, and Richie couldn’t help but grin a little at that even though his insides were still all topsy-turny. It was always fun to see ol’ Stan worked up. “You can’t -- this is your *chance*, Richie.”

“Chance at *what*, though?”

Stan frowned at him like it obvious, blindingly obvious. Richie supposed that it was…

“At love,” Stanley said, simply. ‘Cause, of course. Stan grinned, out of no-where -- it was like the sun. “Amazing that someone as obnoxious as you would have a soulmate, Richie, I’d be sure to appreciate it if I was you --”

“Shut up!”

Stan laughed. “Nah. I think I won’t. *You* never do --”

“*Shaddup!* ” Richie said, in an oddly accented Voice that didn’t have a name yet. “You leave me a-*lone* , ya hear?”

Stan smiled at him, and it was even sort of fond. Richie found that if you got Stan alone he softened, and he was counting on that now.

“‘Sides,” he said, airily, like it was no big to him either way -- “I’ve got one of them *platonic* soulmates -- sorry, Mr. Romantic.”

Stan’s mouth parted in a little ‘o’. “Platonic?”

“Yeah. Means ‘friends,’ smart boy.”

“I *know* what it means. Just didn’t think you *had* any friends, I guess.”

“Hey!” Richie leapt forward, punching Stan lightly on the arm. “We’re best *fuckin’* buds, pal.”

Stan took a step closer to him, and laid a hand on his shoulder for a brief moment, before pulling it back. “I mean, I guess. Losers gotta stick together…”

Damn, Richie thought. Woulda told ya sooner if I knew I’d get this kinda reaction, Stanley --

“But -- friends-soulmates,” Richie offered, tentatively, “I mean -- is that *real*?”

Stan hummed a little, to himself, and suddenly they were walking again, albeit slow and easy. “‘Course it’s real. Some of the greatest soulmates of all time have been friends...don’t they teach you that at Church? It’s in the Bible.”

“It is?” Richie was fascinated. He was aware of the differences between the Tanakh and the Christian Bible in the same way he was aware of the difference between blue jays and sparrows -- i.e., he wasn’t, but he knew that Stan was.

“I mean -- King David *alone* --”

In another context, Richie would’ve said, *Who?* But he couldn’t pretend he didn’t know who that was, that his heart hadn’t sped up at the naming of him.

“The lad who killed Goliath, aye?” He said, his Irish accent even shakier than usual. “I ken…”

Stan studiously ignored the accent, which was fair. “Yeah. King David and the son of Saul, Jonathan…they were brothers in arms, you know? They met before David was king. Jonathan was the prince, then, and heir to the throne -- but when he met David, their soul-marks appeared…and Jonathan gave up the throne for him.”

Stan’s face screwed up, as if trying to remember something. “*Their souls were bound up in one another*,” he said, solemnly. “The line is something like that, in English.”

Richie's heart went *THUMP-THUMP, THUMP-THUMP*, in his chest. Was that how Eddie felt when he was about to have an asthma attack? It was pretty rough, if so. His head felt disconnected, like he was floating above and just watching Stan talk. Eventually, he remembered that he needed to reply.

"Huh," he said. It sounded less like a word and more like a rush of breath coming out.

Stan smiled at him. "Yeah, it's heavy stuff. And King David is the greatest king of Israel, and he wasn't soulmates with any of his wives. Just with his friend. So that proves platonic soulmates pretty handily."

Richie had a sudden vivid vision of the future, where he was grown up and married to a woman who wasn't his soulmate and what, Eddie was -- just there? *Gack! Bad-bad!*

"Wonder how his wives felt about that?"

Stan shrugged. "I think a lot of people in those days married people they didn't really love. Not that not being soulmates doesn't mean you don't love each other! But…"

Not everyone had a soulmate. But if you *did* have one, they were your most important person. That's what everyone always said, anyway.

"So what happened to Jonathan?"

"Oh," Stan said. "Well, he died."

Fuck! Thought Richie, with a sudden spark of wild fear. Hadn't Eddie nearly died last summer, the danger and the heat of thing, Bowers coming after them like a wild animal, as well as something deeper, older, something hard to contemplate? But it was too awful of a prospect to linger on.

"Yeah?" he said, going for casual.

"Yeah," Stan said, nodding to himself. "And when he died, David couldn't handle it…he tore up his hair and his clothes."

Richie shuddered. For some reason a biblical king in mourning seemed *wrong* , but then; any adult in mourning was disconcerting to Richie (-- he was uncomfortable around the Denbroughs for several reasons, that included --) but mostly it was uncomfortable because grief was terrifying. He was eleven years old and lucky enough not to know it yet; and the possibility of it was nearly unbearable.

“Jiminy Cricket,” Richie said, and he could only hope that his voice didn’t shake. “I mean, I hope being friends-soulmate doesn’t doom ya to that, eh?”

Stan laughed. (*God, whatta noise! At a time like this?*) “Don’t panic, Richie. I don’t think it’s a moral necessity that a platonic soulmate die, or anything. That’s just one example. But they really did love each other...even though David outlived Jonathan, that relationship was still foundational for him, you know?”

The way Stan talked sometimes, it was nearly impossible to believe he was a whole grade behind them; he was an intelligent, well-spoken boy. Richie felt bolstered by what he said because if he said it, it must be true...particularly about the Bible, as Richie was pretty sure Stan had more knowledge about that than most Christians at *his* Church, at least...and in general his soft voice seemed very sincere. Richie was suddenly intensely glad he had chosen to tell him, even if he’d confessed barely anything at all.

(*No-one can ever know,* he had thought to himself when he made that original discovery. But he was discovering already, with these friends, that that was not entirely true.)

IV. Mike Hanlon Shares a Memory

The earliest facts that Mike Hanlon learned about soul-marks were these: you and your soulmate had matching marks; that they could look like anything; and that it hurt like hell when they manifested.

It was not until he was ten years old that he learned that the last one

was not in actual fact *true.*

(Mike's father, who's mark had manifested as the Black Spot burned, had protested, *"Hey, I was aflame myself, who am I to know a stray ember from the mark manifesting on my knuckles, what the Hell --"* and his mother had been laughing big with her hand over her mouth. "*You dramatic thing!"* She had said. "*You had to've known Mikey'd learn the truth someday*!"

Mike barely understood what they were talking about -- he wasn't yet familiar with the story of the fire -- but he liked when his mother called him Mikey.)

His father had admitted eventually that *no,* in generally-accepted belief at least, a soul-mark forming was not a painful thing.

It was still a *dangerous* thing, though. His parents didn't say that, but Mike thought it was true all the same. If the *bonding* itself didn't hurt you, the bond surely could…even in the case of his father, whose soulmate was a man called Trev Dawson, before Mike even knew the details about the Black Spot he knew his father would've died for that man, if need be, and vice versa. When bonded mates were close, they knew each other's pain, literally, and who would want to accept that burden? It was a heavy thing to bear for a child, too heavy, and knowing it could happen to him in the future scared him. Before the Losers, he had friends, but he didn't think they were *those* sorts of friends.

But the Losers *were*. That was undeniable. Not only *would* they die for each other, they very nearly had...it was hard for all of them to grasp, but any vestiges of childhood innocence that would've left them unable to grapple with the heady weight of mortality were gone by the end of 1958. The terror of dying that started with seeing the drag-marks by the water, or maybe with Henry Bowers saying he had killed Mike's dog...it hadn't left. Mike was beginning to see that it never, in fact, would.

Alone in his room at night, Mike shuddered. Was it worth it? But he knew that his answer to that didn't really matter. The seven of them

were a collective, parts of a whole...and there was something that tied them together, even unto suffering and death.

Besides, he thought, his father was a happy man, even with a mark on his hand that said, *I'd do anything for another person. He hurts, I hurt.* Mike curled up, and ran a nervous thumb over the scar where Stan had opened their palms. This mark meant much the same, didn't it?

"What happens if you never get a soul-mark?" Bill said, one evening, as they were all sitting around a campfire in the Barrens. "I mean, are you just -- alone?"

"No," Mike said, because his parents weren't soulmates but they were some of the two most in-love people he knew. "There's always friends and partners and…" he searched his mind for other words he'd read in books, "teammates, and comrades."

"I don't know," Beverly said doubtfully, critically examining in her mind the difference between love and acknowledgement. "What if it means we never get a lover?"

"Oh, someone will love *you*," Ben said immediately and genuinely, temporarily unaware of the sensual weight behind his words.

Sitting at a distance from the group -- and up 'till that point uncharacteristically quiet -- Richie made a skeptical noise. "As *if,* " he said. "Losers is losers, huh? We gotta stick together, 'cause who else will have us?" Without meaning to and without thinking about it, his hand drifted to the gentle silver mark on his hip. It was just another thing he would have to ignore.

Stan shook his head at Richie, although he was smiling gently -- he was amused, not annoyed. "One day even *you* will grow up, Richie," he said, not unkindly. "We all will. And it'll be different."

It's already different, Mike thought. Across from him, he watched Beverly chew her lip, and he thought she might feel the same.

"Even without soulmates," Eddie said -- surprising Mike a little; Eddie

usually sat these talks out in favor of staring moodily into the distance. “We can still be *friends*.”

“Yeah,” Ben said, smiling (at Beverly, not Eddie, Mike noted with amusement). “After all this we’ve *got* to be.”

Bill nodded, sort of solemnly, and they all relaxed in some minute way -- Big Bill agreed, and now, it *must* be true.

Richie sprang to his feet with that sudden energy he seemed to explode with. (Mike liked Richie because he liked all the Losers, but he would admit to being awful confused by him, sometimes). “Yeah, right! I’ll be too busy being a *faaamous* rock’n’roller to deal with you lot!” He launched into a rendition of ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ that was so bad that Stan winced and covered his ears, but Mike couldn’t help but laugh, and he saw that Beverly was giggling into Ben’s shoulder as he sat, stock-still and blushing, beside her.

“Who’d wanna be friends with *you?"* Eddie said in disgust as Richie rocked his hips like Elvis did. “Be *serious*,” Stan said, annoyed, at the same time.

Perhaps stymied by their boos, Richie slowed to a stop and rounded on Eddie, grinning. “But I’ll still hang out with *you*, Eds...because you’re so *cute!* ” He pinched at Eddie’s cheek quick enough that Eddie barely had time to roll away, shrieking.

“I don’t know if Richie’ll *ever* grow up,” Mike heard Beverly murmur to Ben, who laughed. Mike looked up and saw that Bill was smiling, all soft and fond, at all of them. For an instant over the sparking fire their eyes met, and Mike and Bill grinned at each other. Without noticing that they were doing it, both of them rubbed, simultaneously, at the still-healing scars on their palms.

V. Eddie Kaspbrak Considers Some Possibilities

It wasn’t so much that Eddie had anything in particular against his friends talking about soulmates -- it was kind of just one of those

things that everyone talked about; sometimes casually, sometimes seriously, and on any and all occasions -- and he suspected that it would probably always be that way. It was just that he had nothing to contribute. He thought about soulmates sometimes, but it didn't seem to be in the same way his classmates and friends did. For instance, he didn't *want* a soul-mark, and he barely ever heard anyone say that. (He thought Beverly might've once, but she'd been talking to Bill, so he wasn't sure.)

Eddie didn't want a soul-mark because, quite simply, he was *scared* of them. To his young mind, they were dangerous things, like a hot stove...something for adults to deal with. His mother could handle having a soulmate who was *dead* because she was an adult, but Eddie wouldn't able to do something like that...he was not so strong as his mother. And he did know that it hurt her terribly. Soulmates could turn out all right, like Richie Tozier's parents, but you might also never meet them (there were rumors of a teacher at Derry Elementary having manifested a mark *already* faded, and Eddie thought that probably wasn't possible, but what if it *was* ?), or you could meet them and be happy and then lose that. You could meet them and then they could get sick and die horribly and you'd *feel* it, all the way down. And what if, like some other parents he knew, you *weren't* soulmates, but one of you *had* a mark, and then you *met* your soulmate -- what then?

There were simply too many variables, and no easy way to protect yourself. That was a sharp-edged thing if Eddie ever saw one, right there.

So the day that he discovered the soul-mark on the back of his leg (which had in fact manifested several days prior, without him noticing) he felt no excitement and a lot of dread. The idea of telling his mother was considered, but swiftly dismissed...he didn't even *know* what she'd do, but it couldn't be good. And so it, quickly and quietly, became Eddie's secret. He probably wouldn't've told his friends anyways (Stan and Ben and maybe some of the others, Mike perhaps? would be excited, and he didn't want *that* any more than he wanted his mother's panic --), but he felt that somehow his friend's knowing was already too close to his mother knowing.

There was no room amongst the steady panic that the mark invoked

in him for any of the usual excitements of childhood soul-bonding -- Eddie did not wonder who it was, he did not fantasize about marrying her; in fact the kindest thought he had to girl who must share his mark was *I hope she doesn't get hurt*, and that was because he didn't want to feel it too.

(He did feel things, from time to time, but they were subtle -- like his soulmate just scraped her knuckles, or something. In those moments he'd wring his hands together, or hop from foot to foot, or sit and read a comic -- anything to distract himself from it, pretend he wasn't noticing her suffering.)

And so it would be years before his mother would see the mark that sat proud and silver on the back of her son's knee. By that time, without him even knowing it, he was already beginning to forget the boy who shared that mark.

VI. Richie Tozier Sees the Future

If Eddie Kaspbrak ever laid in bed ignoring his soulmate, what he didn't know was that his soulmate was lying in bed trying to do the same thing -- unsuccessfully. 1959 was full of restless nights for Richie Tozier; before and after the manifestation of his mark. The killings that had torn through 1858 were over, but somehow it still wasn't quite enough. (Years later, Richie would think, *was that a premonition?*) Now, the real terror began -- the terrors of growing up, the weight of living.

Having a soul-mark wasn't supposed to feel like you had a ball of lead tied 'round your ankle, dragging you down to some forgotten depths. Of that, he was fairly sure...but he couldn't help the anxiety that filled him when his mark did appear; he couldn't *help* it if his soul-mark and -mate labeled him as *Other*.

Richie had a bad dream one night, and it was only a bad dream 'cause

they'd killed It, but -- it felt so fucking real and he woke up terrified all the same --

JUST FRIENDS, RICHIE? *The clown said, in the dream. It wasn't laughing, but there was that inflection in its voice -- like it wanted to be, like it was laughing in its heart, if it had one.* IS THAT *SOOO*?

WHY DON'T YOU TELL EDDIE THAT, THEN? LITTLE EDDIE-BEAR? DON'T YOU THINK HE'LL *BELIEVE* YOU?

And that was the question, wasn't it? Why didn't *he tell Eddie? He'd told Bev. He hadn't told Stan but he thought it might be a possibility. Friends was friends. Losers stick together. It wasn't that big a deal, really, except for how it* was.

He didn't tell Eddie because, simply, he knew not to. The reasons why were more *felt* than *known* by the Richie Tozier that existed in 1959, but by 1985 he would have a more articulate grasp on it. Derry could be a cruel town, perhaps because of Pennywise or maybe it would've been that way despite of him -- but regardless it was impossible to imagine the place without the alien being literally carving out the earth of it; the crater of It landing forever a fixture of the underground of Derry, Maine.

Derry, Maine, where Adrian Mellon would be murdered after walking out of a bar with his soulmate; where you couldn't even buy some ice cream or go to the movies without someone shoving you around, shattering your glasses or even your arm. Where six children grew to be adults who forgot and one child grew to be an adult who remembered.

Eds? Was what Richie thought in one of the last thoughts of Eddie Kaspbrak he'd have for quite some time, *Are you waiting for me like I'm waiting for you?* In the truth of it, Eddie was not, but such was the way of things; even the existence of soulmates did not cause happenstance to cease her weary work. Richie would wait, and Eddie would wait for something completely different, and -- for a time -- that was that.

“Hey-uh, Eddie, catch --” And Richie tossed Eddie’s aspirator to him, gently, intending as stated for him to catch it.

Eddie did, face flushed bright-red. “Not funny, Trashmouth,” he said in one long exhale of breath, even though it was him who dropped the damn thing in the first place, and Richie was just passing it back.

“Ain’t meant to be funny, Eddie-my-love,” Richie said, easily. He thought maybe it was odd that he could continue to tease Eddie like this, knowing what he knew about himself, but -- honestly -- when he was with Eddie it just came back automatically, simple as anything.

“Good, ‘cause I ain’t laughing,” Eddie said, moodily, but his elbow prodded at Richie’s side, friendly and familiar.

I ain’t laughin’ either, *Richie thought.* Hell! If this is a mistake, or damnation, then -- whatta way to go!

2. The In-Between (I)

Summary for the Chapter:

Snippets of the Loser's 27 years.

I.

Ben Hanscom wasn't a particularly nostalgic man; although perhaps that was simply because the past wasn't something he really recalled. But still -- some memories stick in the mind and coalesce; the dramatic ones, the really lovely ones, the chaotic ones -- but sometimes something mundane sticks and stays there, unyielding, throughout the years.

He had been shaving at the bathroom sink. He was young enough then that this was still sort of exciting and new. His fingers followed the curve of the razor-blade, feeling for loose hairs, feeling the vulnerable stretch of his neck, feeling the pulse-point of his neck -- and suddenly yes it *was* sensual, and he wanted very deeply that it was someone else's fingers there.

But *whose*? At fifteen Ben was already a romantic. Not that he didn't think about other things but he wanted...he thought that he wanted… *well…*

The truth was that he didn't know what he wanted, and he couldn't know, because he'd forgotten her and she'd forgotten him. But in the back of his mind in that one wondrous moment he had a glimpse of red hair, and a delicate ankle bracelet, and a tattered sweatshirt, and scabby knees on gangly legs...and a smile that had lit up his world in ultraviolet light.

What? he thought, because he hadn't even had a real crush yet, right, so who…?

The forgetting of it wasn't perfect, wasn't complete. (In 1985, that would be reassuring, comforting, like maybe It wasn't all powerful; in the meantime it was just frustrating and confusing and he didn't

know what he was feeling, didn't recognize the fingers he was half-fantasizing about…but he remembered the feeling of that moment in the bathroom, the rabbit-quick race of his pulse and feel of his his own flesh and the lightning flash of longing for a girl he didn't know.)

II.

Right around the time that he graduated college, Bill Denbrough had a brief flare of interest in the concept of soulmates. It was not a subject he'd been particularly passionate about in the past; his parents were soulmates but that had not encouraged within him a great trust in the phenomenon. In his exploration, he did the only thing he really knew how to do, and wrote about it.

He wrote something strange and uncharacteristic, a story about soulmates who never met but who always longed for each other. He never finished the story because he didn't know how it should end, and because his agent, Susan, laughed when she read it.

"Not really your wheelhouse, is it?" she said, wryly, handing the sheath of papers back to him. She was lounging on the bed in just her bra and shorts, and her loose hair hung prettily over her forehead.

"I guess not," Bill said, and then he kissed her. She cupped his chin in one small hand and he liked the way her fingertips brushed through the pin-pricks of his stubble. He let her push at him and the two of them laid back against the bed. Susan had a soulmate, and in fact she knew who it was -- but she and her intended had decided to leave each other alone for now, and let life take them where it would.

"*If soulmates are so destined, why aren't I making love with* him *right now?" She'd teased on one memorable occasion; naked and restless in his bed, her hand exploring between his legs.*

Bill had gasped, and then moaned, and then -- "Well, if you're soulmates you're meant to compatible and what could be more compatible than

agreeing to that *?"*

Her hand had lifted to grip at his shoulder and she leaned over him, her face against his chest, to laugh and laugh… "Maybe," she said…"Maybe you're right! You just might *be, Bill Denbrough!"*

He didn't know, really, whether he was right; his own body remained unblemished by a soul-mark, and for some reason he expected it to remain that way. He didn't mind so much. There were plenty of other things in life.

III.

Beverly had just slept with a man named Andrew and now she was smoking on the balcony of his apartment, which overlooked the city and was surrounded by bright lights which flickered and winked at her. She hadn't been thinking about soulmates at all until she had seen the silver flash of a mark on Andrew's ankle and then she couldn't *stop* thinking about them, about her own skin which was clear of such marks…

She had been terrified of getting a soul-mark as a child. She didn't like to think of that but she knew that it was true. When she thought of it now, it was in a vague, almost detached way...but as a young girl she knew the truth: she had feared getting a soul-mark because what if her father had the same one and she was trapped, had to be his most important person forever?

She couldn't have said exactly why that was bad but she knew that it was not good. She shuddered at the memory of it, although she had no idea why it had even occurred to her. (*I worry about you, Bevvie,* his voice said in her mind. *I worry A LOT!*)

Soul-marks like that didn't even happen; specifically they didn't occur between family members but what if -- what *if* --

But now she was here on this balcony and she hadn't spoken to Al Marsh in years but she was letting Andrew touch her, and what did

that mean? Nothing, it meant nothing, of course…

Nothing except for the fact that there was some longing within her, maybe not for a soulmate but for a lover who *saw* her and loved and wanted her anyway...TV programmes and radio specials were always trying to make out that soulmates meant those things but truly she'd take it any way she could...and soulmates were still terrifying in their own way.

(A sudden remembrance struck her like a lightning bolt made of childhood fear. But was it her own fear or someone else's? She thought she recalled sharing a cigarette with someone, and then -- but no, it was gone as quickly as it had come.)

The nicotine in her mouth overlapped with the remembered taste of it from all those years ago and the combination went sour on her tongue. She stubbed out her cigarette and pulled her sweater tighter around her shoulders, although it wasn't yet very cold. She stared over the city for a moment, and then she turned around and went back inside to Andrew's apartment, to Andrew's bed.

IV.

Sonia Kaspbrak did not much approve of her son dating girls, but that didn't mean it never happened. One of the times Eddie left her, in which he went to college, he dated a woman named Melissa for almost five months, which was for him a very long time.

They had one class together and she had approached him, not the other way around. She had called him cute, which for some reason had annoyed him. (He thought perhaps this was because his mother still called him little and sweet and other things he didn't feel). But he liked her, all the same. She had long black hair that got a little wavy when she didn't blow-dry it, and a wide pretty face. On their fifth date together they had pleasant, unassuming sex.

It was good and that was that. He wanted very much to make her

happy, to let her enjoy herself...and he did. Eddie was not a particularly romantic man, really, and in fact in his relationships with women there was some odd distance that even he was aware of -- a sense of practicality without sentiment.

He liked Melissa and she liked him, but neither of them would've said they were in love with each other. (If asked, Melissa would've said that Eddie was very sweet and kind and she loved him even if she wasn't *in* love. And Eddie would've said that Melissa was very pretty and smart and good and he loved her, too).

Melissa had a silver mark on her inner thigh that few people got to see. In fact, every woman that Eddie Kaspbrak ever went on a date with, not counting the notable exception of his wife, had a soul-mark, although none of them had yet met their intendeds. It was sort of nice, in a way...they were the kind of girls who wanted a soulmate one day, they just also didn't mind some exploration along the way. And Eddie had grown into a handsome young man, with gentle hands and kind eyes. He knew he was a filler before they met their prince -- but that was fine. (It was possible he should've been dismayed by that. It was just that he didn't really want to be anyone's prince at all.) He continued to ignore his own mark, though when people noticed it he didn't get offended. He just hadn't met that person yet. No need to mention that he keenly hoped he never would.

Myra did not have a soulmate. He knew that that fact worried her, not on her the merits of her own life, but because Eddie had his mark -- what if some other woman came and stole him away from her? The first time she'd expressed this to Eddie, he'd laughed.

"I don't believe in soulmates, Marty," he told her, quite genuinely. "I mean, not that I don't think that they exist. I admit that they do. It's just I don't think they have to mean anything if you don't want them to. I'm not waiting for anything."

And truly, he wasn't. Myra had looked at him with glistening eyes, and he leaned forward and kissed her. "Promise?" Myra asked. She giggled a little.

Eddie smiled at her. He was used to playing at childishness. It was

easy. “I promise,” he told her.

V.

“You have a *soul-mark?* ” Annette said, her voice dipping and rising through the sentence; she was a little tipsy; they all were. “Lemme see it!”

And there it was -- a party trick to be used in flirting-emergencies. “Of course ya can, darlin’ -- if yer ready for that --” she laughed prettily, her hand cupped over her mouth, and Richie pulled his shirt up, dipping his thumb into a belt loop to shimmy his pants low enough on his waist so that she could see.

“Oh!” she said, wide eyes on the little silver mark. She reached out a hand to press against it. “How...*intimate* of a spot.” He looked down at her pink-painted nails on his pale flesh.

“You really don’t know who it is?” Mary asked, from beside her.

“Nope,” he said. “Not a clue. She must be far away, though. I never feel any random pains or anything.”

“It’s not just pain, you know,” Annette said, her fingertips still pressing into his hip. “I mean I’ve heard about…it’s strong physical sensations, right? So...imagine it...you’re making love and you *feel* her…”

Richie had heard that too, and he’d thought about it like Annette apparently had. He couldn’t help the shiver that ran up his spine as some intense spike of want hit him.

“That’s fucking creepy,” Mary said beside them, apparently not sensing the mood, “Dude. My orgasm is *my* orgasm. He doesn’t get to have that too!”

“Well, that’s feminism for you,” Richie deadpanned, and Annette laughed as she finally pulled her hand back, leaving Richie’s hips

feeling cold without her touch.

“I think it’d be nice,” Annette said, her voice dipping into vagueness as her mind visibly slipped sideways into an imaginary scenario. “Double the fun!” Mary snorted, and then leaned over to whisper something into Annette’s ear that made her laugh again, this time a pure simple laugh where she didn’t bother to cover her mouth. She blushed at it, too, or maybe that was just redness from drinking or dancing. It was lovely, whatever it was, wild spots of life on her plump lively cheeks.

He went home with her, with Annette, and by that point he was living alone off his burgeoning new salary and so they watched bad TV and ate the leftover pizza in his fridge and then they had sex in his bed and Annette laughed through all of it; a bright vibrant woman, carefree in everything. She told him where to touch her and then grinned at him devilishly, because she knew where to touch him, too -- he didn’t know how she knew so easily, but she did.

“Imagine it,” she whispered to him, her face red and sweaty with exertion, leaning over him as her whole body rocked in rhythm, “I feel what you feel, you feel what I feel -- Oh God!” she said as he moved with her. “Isn’t it *romantic*?”

And it *was*. It was romantic playing at it with her and he barely knew her. He woke up in the morning and he wanted it still. The idea of shared pain had never threatened to scare him away, but even if it *had* -- the idea of shared pleasure would be one helluva counter-argument. Score one for the universe and her love-destinies!

VI.

I have been interested in Derry for a long time -- as long as I have been interested in my father’s stories, I suppose, which is about as long as I can remember -- and so it seems appropriate that I start compiling my notes in

one place, for easy access. Even if I might damn well be the only one who wants *to access it.*

The truth is that today I am not even thinking about Derry at all. Or, well…I am, I very much am…but I'm thinking about soulmates as well.

And I'm thinking about six other people, six kids who grew up and went away. And they forgot, but I didn't.

So what does that mean?

The thing is we were almost like soulmates.

I know it's juvenile and slightly absurd but after all the shit we went through I think I can be forgiven that much, at least. It's just I can't stop thinking about my father and how his mark manifested over his knuckles while the Black Spot burned and his friend Trev saved his life by keeping hold of his hand.

We saved each other; all of us…and in the darkness under Derry we held on to each other. So why don't we get something to show for it as well?

The silver scars from Stan's coke bottle had faded off Mike's hand even if the memories hadn't. He was, genuinely, still too afraid of soulmates to really *want* one…his experience with the Losers had sort of ended up making that worse instead of better.

So when Carole Danner asked him if he had a mark, why did he nearly not know what to say?

"No," he said, eventually, when the gears in his mind had turned over and reminded him of the truth. "I don't. Do you?"

"Yes," she said, her voice a little intense, like maybe she'd had bad reactions to that before. "I do. But I'm not waiting for him."

Mike smiled at her. He liked that -- felt comforted that there was someone important to her out there, maybe, since he had six important someones who were far away -- "That seems fair enough," he said. "Can't spend your whole life waiting for the next bit to

happen, right?"

Something in her posture relaxed ever so slightly as he said that. "Exactly," she said. "Now, would you mind explaining that to my mother?"

She smiled wide, her crooked white teeth bits of light in the dark. Mike smiled back. He liked her; he liked her quite a bit. She liked him back, and they danced around each other in a rather marvelous display, like animals in mating season or maybe just like 20th century human beings. He wasn't sure where they'd end up but he was excited as all-Hell to see it, just the same.

Perhaps he had a soulmate or perhaps he didn't...but it was like he'd told her. There was no real use in waiting around for it to happen. He had one thing looming over his head already, and that was plenty.

VII.

Meeting Patty was the greatest blessing of Stan's life. That's how it felt, anyway.

It wasn't that she was perfect (although sometimes in quiet moments he sort of felt that she was) -- or that she was exactly what he needed (although God *again* she was she *was*) but it was that Patricia Blum came into the life of Stanley Uris exactly when he needed that to occur; when he was this foolish young thing, about to thrust head-first into adult life, and when he needed hope and structure and a way forward she gave it to him. She offered it up easy, with a smile on her pretty face. Stan sank into it; Patty felt like home, like something half-remembered…like comfort.

Thank you God! he thought to a creator he didn't even always know that he believed in. But Patty did believe -- he had always loved that you could sense that about her, feel the belief that went down straight to her heart -- and he was feeling connected and a part of a whole and like maybe he *could* count as a member of the minyan and

it was alright, it was Godly; a sending-up to the universe; alive and powerful and real and --

Are you there, God? It's me, Stanley Uris. And he laughed at the absurdity of it. How bold of him to ever think he'd receive an answer? Patty wouldn't have thought that she would and that's why he burrowed his face into the curve of her neck; alright well maybe it wasn't *why,* but it was important. Patty was humble, but she felt things deeply and keenly, and when it was just the two of them she'd tell him almost anything. She was sweet to him and sweet *on* him, and for all the years that they were married, could still make the other blush.

They were also soulmates, which was lovely. He had wanted that and wouldn't have denied that fact, but he had also resolutely refused to be the sort of man who got desperate about it. When his soul-mark appeared on the underside of his right wrist, he did not put any ads in the paper or follow any superstitions meant to bring true love his way (Well, maybe a *few*, but he hadn't expected them to actually *work*.) Stanley Uris had simply switched his watch to the other wrist and started wearing his sleeve-cuffs rolled up. He was still quite young, only twenty-one years old, but he was ready. He waited.

He simply had a feeling that everything would work out. When he touched his mark, it felt warm under his fingers, and that would always make him smile. Not long after, he'd met Patty; because he'd been right -- everything *would* work out. For a time, at least.

3. The In-Between (II)

Summary for the Chapter:

The years of The Forgetting, part two.

Next stop, 1985.

I.

Stanley Uris woke up early, before his wife. Morning sunlight filtered in — barely — through their blinds and in the delicate light of it he watched Patty for a moment as she slept, her face bunched up and pressed tight into her pillow. He was still lying in bed thinking about her when she awoke.

“Good morning,” she said. “It’s Saturday. It’s nice to have a day together, isn’t it?” They’d both been awfully busy recently, but Saturdays were slow and she was right. It *was* nice. Instead of getting up they stayed in bed and made love, gentle and easy. Patty laughed into her pillow as Stan whispered into her ear a bad joke; neither of them were distracted by the thoughts that sometimes came, of wanting children and being angry with their bodies for not providing. Flesh was plenty good for other things as well.

Eventually they got up and they showered, together, like they had when they were silly young things. Patty laughed like a sorority girl. Stanley smiled at her. He liked when his wife laughed. When he was happy it made his whole face light up, and he looked young, very young like that, although he was of course nearing forty.

“Let’s go out,” she said, as they were getting dressed. Stan was pulling on his socks as she curled mascara (clear instead of black, she liked a subtle look) into her lashes. “Let’s just do something together, I don’t know, anything.”

“Alright,” Stan said, and he smiled. An hour later, after they’d had breakfast, he drove her to a music shop. He watched her as she flipped through jazz records and thought, rather smugly, *That’s my wife. Mine!* For surely she was quite gorgeous and quite kind and all

the other things that you'd want your wife to be. The album she chose was not particularly expensive, but he still delighted in being able to buy it for her. As they crossed the street back to the car, they held hands.

I love you, Patty! Stanley Uris thought. He then spent a brief but intense moment wishing there was a child, to hold his other hand. To be ushered between them and listen to all their favorite albums — that would complete the picture. But there wasn't, and in his heart he had that same odd surety that there never would be...

When they got home, she put on her record, and it was to the sound of it that Stanley rinsed off some strawberries and added them to a little bowl with their green leaves cut off, and doused them in sugar and whipped cream. Patty laughed when he handed her the bowl with a little fork.

"What is this about?" she said, and Stan shrugged.

"Can't I spoil my own wife every now and then?" He said, and he grinned. It was the early 80s, and they had several unblemished years still in front of them.

II.

Beverly was sitting outside of her best friend's apartment. She had just finished a cigarette, and was nursing the drink Kay had mixed for her in lieu of lighting another. It was dark out, the night a comforting blanket on her, obscuring all her flaws and all her fears.

"You know," Kay said, into the night air. "I've been thinking about soulmates, and everyone is aware that I'm not a fan, but — I dunno. I was thinking, like — I'd be alright if *you* were my soulmate."

"Wow," Beverly said, her smile quirking, one eyebrow raised. "Are you coming on to me?" She liked being with Kay. Things were easy between them. In all honesty, Kay was one of the few friendships that Beverly had that was surviving her relationship with Tom. (She didn't

much like to think about that, though.)

“No! God! Mind in the gutter, girl, where does *that* get you — I was thinking about platonic soulmates, actually.”

“Ah, the classic ‘we’re just friends’...!” Beverly tapped a finger against the side of her glass, shooting Kay another smile.

Kay laughed. When she was with Beverly and just with Beverly, her laugh was loud and rough and exuberant, and Beverly thought it was really quite lovely.

“If you think it’s all just a ploy, there’s a lot more homosexuals than we thought, eh?”

“Well, maybe there are!”

Kay laughed again. “Alright, alright, I get it, you’re very enlightened. But seriously — that whole platonic deal, it wouldn’t be so bad. I mean, I almost wish I’d get a damn soul-mark of any sort already so I could just stop worrying about it, you feel me?”

Beverly laughed. “Yeah, I feel you...I mean, me too, I guess. If it was purely a choice I’d opt out, but...I never really think of platonic soulmates.”

“Seems like mostly no one ever does, honestly.”

“All sorts of reasons for that.”

Kay cocked an eyebrow, as if on queue. “Well, yeah, Bev.”

“I’m just saying that because I knew someone — hmm. Well, I don’t know. I don’t even know why I got so defensive there.”

“Some secret confession to make to me?” Kay said it like a joke, her eyes wide, but there was a...gentleness, a softness, that told Beverly — *If there’s anything you need to tell me, anything at all, you can.*

Beverly laughed, and it felt so care-free, so easy, so simple. It wasn’t, of course, nothing was...but by God it felt good to pretend. She squeezed her hand tight on Kay’s shoulder, leaned in close to get a

whiff of the scent of the cologne she wore.

“I know what you mean, though,” she said, smiling but earnest. “I wouldn’t mind being platonic soulmates with you, either.”

“Yeah?” Kay said, and then she leaned in and kissed Beverly firmly on the lips. In all honesty, Beverly thought, it felt like any other kiss. But there was something thrilling about it, too, and when they broke apart she stayed still for a moment, feeling her lip with a gentle finger.

“Yeah,” Beverly said, unsure even of what she was answering — but she did love Kay. More than most relationships in her life, really, she loved Kay. She was so lucky to have her. Two unmatched beings, who found each other and hung on for dear life.

“Well, *good,* ” Kay said, firmly, and then something settled between them into the cool night air. In a moment, Kay would insult Tom, and then in another moment Beverly was defend him (although why she’d do that she couldn’t say —) and everything would be back to it’s careful balance of normalcy. She touched her lip one more time. She wanted to remember that kiss.

III.

When he was in college, Richie Tozier had dated a woman named Alanna Goodman for six months. They weren’t the best six months of his life by any means, but they were pretty good. Not bad, at least. It was years later, and he was sitting beside Alanna once again, listening as she told him something very personal about herself. After she finished, they sat in silence for a while. He still smoked, then, and she did too. At one point they exhaled a stream of smoke at the same time, and Richie watched it dissipate into the already-stale air of his apartment.

“I ever hear any of this in one of your shit jokes and you’re *dead meat* , Tozier.” Alanna said. There was a hard edge to it that meant she

wasn't really joking.

"Aw, c'mon," Richie said. "I wouldn't."

Alanna frowned at him, one eyebrow raising dangerously. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Richie said, although probably he'd been guilty of worse things.

"Okay," she said, nodding a little. "But I'm keeping an ear out, yeah? The first indication of an 'I fucked a lesbian' story, and —"

"And it won't be pretty?"

She leaned close to punch him lightly on the shoulder. "It really won't."

"Is my reputation really *that* bad?"

"It kinda is, dude. The Trashmouth Who Tells All...that's your whole radio gag. Half of 'em in those dumb little impressions you do, but like...that's still a lot of chatter."

Richie frowned. "Hm. I guess you're not wrong. There *is* too much chatter…It's just a persona, thought, I mean, I can change it. I've been thinking, I've got to get back to my radical roots, anyway — you know, I used to get called a pinko commie all the time, but the other day, this older gentleman calls into my radio show, and you know what he calls me?"

"What does he call you, Rich?" There was a little smile lifting one side of her mouth; a soft private expression that he remembered from their time together.

"A 'bleeding-heart liberal.' I mean, how's that for a *downgrade* , am I right?"

Alanna laughed. "Okay, so talk more about Marx and less about sex. And read a damn feminist theorectical text. That'll fix ya right up."

"But sex and politics go hand in hand! I think it was Foucault who

said that."

"I don't think it was, though," Alanna said, but shot him a small fond glance. He watched her as she bent her head to stub out the end of her cig on his makeshift ashtray.

"You'll ruin all your plates if you keep using them as ashtrays," she said quietly.

"I know," Richie said. There was silence between them for a while. Eventually, Richie decided to try his hand at sincerity. No Voices required.

"Hey," he said. "Thanks for telling me this, Al. Ya didn't have to."

Alanna leaned over on the couch so their shoulders were pressed together. "I didn't. But I wanted to. You would've heard about it eventually, but I thought...since we dated, maybe you deserved to know early."

"Glad to be of service in turning you gay."

She laughed, big, for the second time that evening. "Babe, if anyone turned me gay, it wasn't *you* ."

"Does that mean I was good in bed?" He said, hopefully.

"It means girls are *better* ."

Richie in turn laughed at that, and he was still grinning, open-mouthed, when Alanna put her hand on his chin and pulled him in to kiss him.

"Thanks for being decent about it, Rich," she said when she pulled back.

"De nada," Richie said, and he never forgot that evening they had together, in his cheap smoked-out apartment, and the secrets revealed therein.

IV.

"A recent study of dementia patients and their long-term partners sheds new insights — and new doubts — on popular conceptions of the phenomenon of soulmate pain-share…in that, while the patient and their loved one may be physically close, even touching, the pain is felt or not felt as if they were quite far from each other. It seems 'distance' from one's soulmate can include them simply not recognizing you. The small sample size of the study means no concrete conclusions can be drawn from this, of course, but it does prove very intriguing…"

The dull drone of the report was replaced by a snappy reporter saying, in that characteristically careless tone, "Well, intriguing is *one* way to put it! Hear that, boys and girls? If you're tired of feeling your wife's stubbed toes, just forget her — literally!" He laughed, falsely and loudly, and then transitioned seamlessly: "Anyway… it's time for Tozier's Freaky Forty — I'm sure Records Tozier will tide you over — "

Eddie switched off the radio at that. He tried to avoid encountering any discussion of marks, but when it happened, he always had to take a minute to process it, and that frustrated him. He needed a moment to think in peace. Mostly he ignored the mark the rested, hidden, on his leg, but even a man as skeptical of soulmates as Eddie Kaspbrak was could not be entirely immune to the intrigue on the topic. Had he ever felt phantom pain from his soulmate? No, he didn't think he had...and he would certainly have noticed some mysterious hurt of his flesh. His soulmate was alive, judging by the mark, so whoever it was simply had to be very far away and did not know him...which was fine. Good, even. He was married, after all, and he loathed the idea of some unexpected element appearing into his careful life to explode it to pieces.

The irony of escaping his life with his mother only to replace it with a woman who could be her sister did not escape him — but by God, what else could he do? He had never managed to live an adult life on his own for very long at all. And he couldn't ignore that despite everything he did love Myra, in his way. And certainly she loved him. That was a blessing, wasn't it?

And there was some other thing, some strange nagging thought buried deep in the back of his mind — it wouldn't happen of course, but what if his soulmate wasn't —? But even in his own mind he could not say it.

He wasn't thinking of that because he had been refusing, quite rightfully, he thought, to think of that for a long time. Years. Many years. It was perhaps cowardly but Eddie could see nothing to be gained be being brave. There was a helluva lot to be *lost* from being brave, though.

And really, he was happy enough with his life, wasn't he? He had Myra, and, well — if what they had wasn't perfect (and he *did* know that it wasn't —) it was still normal enough. They had sex; it was fine; and they could be gentle to each other; they had little talks and little jokes and he called her *Marty* and despite all the horrible underlying things he loved her and she loved him. So — a soulmate would be an unneeded burden. (*My God — it would break her heart.*)

(*If she knew — if she knew that —*

Oh God if his mother had known that —)

But there was no use to that train of thought, so he always tried to cut it off at the head when it got started. No utility in considering things that couldn't be. Eddie tried not to indulge in such exercises.

Once, when he was fresh out of college he had lived in his own apartment by himself and that apartment had contained a gym. Eddie was not a frequenter, but he had been bold back then, and he had gone sometimes and jogged on the elliptical or the track. He liked the feeling of sweat in the lower curve of his back, even if the tightness that came to his chest sometimes scared him. It was a familiar fear, after all.

There was another man who he saw several times and who he paid attention to. He did not know this man's name when he first noticed him, but he eventually learned that it was Dave. Dave never knew Eddie's name and in all likelihood never noticed Eddie to begin with.

Dave was around his age. Maybe a little bit older, or he just seemed settled. He lifted weights while Eddie jogged on the track that circled overtop the basketball courts. Neither of them ever set foot on the courts themselves; and Eddie felt bolstered by the way that Dave stuck to solo workouts, just like he did.

If you asked him he couldn't have told you why it was that he paid attention to Dave — and that was how he thought of it. He was looking or staring he was just — paying attention. And that was all. They never once spoke. Not long after his last gym visit, Eddie moved back in with his mother. He did not look at men. Eventually, he stopped thinking about Dave.

(There was an ease to the manner in which Eddie was not brave. He had learned the lesson of fearing his own desires quite well.)

V.

Ben Hanscom knew the woman at the little table a few feet away from the bar was looking at him. The lighting was dim, and he thought that the bartender had probably assumed that Ben hadn't noticed, but he had. As much at the bartender paid close attention to him, Ben paid close attention to that woman and the swept-up mass of dark brown hair that framed her pretty face. She kept flickering her made-up eyes over near him and lingering her gaze. Real delicate, real soft — but he noticed it. Of course he did.

She really was quite lovely. Easy on the eyes, as they said. She was drinking a vodka cranberry and Ben had thought about buying her another one, but he didn't want her to think he was trying to get her drunk. He didn't even want her to think he was interested because the truth was that he wasn't, not really. There were plenty of women

in Ben's life that he could've maybe had something with, but he didn't — he did not have a girlfriend, and he had not had a girlfriend in years.

It wasn't that Ben's time away from Derry was one long arduous slog in which he had no friends and no relationships. Rather, he simply regressed to a similar status to that which he'd had as a child — he was not particularly lonely, because he did not know what it was like to be not-lonely. He had forgotten.

It wasn't a tragedy...it wasn't even really very sad. Ben had been a gentle and sensitive soul as a child and he had grown up into a kind and thoughtful adult. Thoughtful, as in: he liked to think, to consider. He made things with his hands and he mulled things over in his mind. He was good for long conversations about books; he even make little specific jokes about them, if you engaged with him for long enough. And of course it did not hurt that he was handsome. Plenty of women liked him, and occasionally he liked them back. It never went anywhere, but that was fine. It was all *fine* .

"You want another round, Ben?" the bartender asked him, sounding almost hopeful. If Ben wanted to make a move, now was the time.

"No thanks, Ricky Lee," Ben said, giving him a soft smile. "I think I'll head on home now." And he did; back to his big empty house.

VI.

Audra woke up crying. Or at least, Bill woke up to find her already awake, and in tears; she looked at him with wide terrified eyes, and he could feel the sharpness of the emotions she was clearly feeling — he thought, *Maybe this is like being soulmates, sharing that pain.*

Except for that it was the very issue of soulmates that was making Audra sob like her heart was breaking. In fact, her heart was already

broken — she had a mark on her stomach that was a soft faded gray. She had had a soulmate, once, but he was dead. She had in fact never even met him.

“Why couldn’t I stop it?” Audra said. She was no longer sobbing, but it was obvious she had been — it was the noise of that that had pulled him from sleep. Bill thought that the quiet stillness she was slipping into might actually be even worse. “If it’s so — I mean if we were so fucking *well-matched* by the universe or God or whatever then why —”

Bill didn’t know the answers to her questions, but then maybe no one did (although a priest or a philosophy professor might try to offer one).

“I’m sorry, Audra,” he said, and put his arms around her. In all honesty he didn’t know what else to do. How could a man justify to his wife that her pre-destined lover was dead, and he was now all that she had? There was simply no reasonable away around it. He didn’t try. Their relationship was built on a foundation that required that they both told the truth, even when it hurt. He hated to hurt her, but sometimes it was necessary. At least he could wipe away her tears, this time; her soulmark had faded before they even met.

He pulled her close and swept her hair back off her face so that she cry herself out in peace, if she wanted. Seeing her like this was rare enough that it engaged some primal fear in himself, and he rubbed at his own eyes, too.

“I’m sorry, Audra,” he said again. That was about the long and short of it. There was nothing else he knew how to say.

VII.

Mike wished that he could say something very brave and noble like, *I don’t want to call them but I know that I have to, I know that it’s time* . But the truth was that he was scared and tired, exhausted even, and

he just desperately wanted someone to share the burden. Anyone, really. He dreamed of the Losers almost nightly; he kept hearing their voices in his mind, voices drawn from memories that every over person who possessed them had forgotten, which was disturbing in its own way.

It could've been anyone, that first call, and it could've been anyone that he called last. He had no order written out; he accepted fate for that. Fate or whatever you might want to call that other thing, (*that Other presence* —), the force, that had helped tie seven young souls together.

Alright, then, he thought, *here we go*. And he picked up the receiver even though his hands would surely shake. To his surprise, they did not. His hands held steady.

His heart didn't hold half as well. He could feel it pounding away in his chest, like running too-fast and too-long. Like being chased. (He had plenty memories of that).

It had to be them. It had to be them all, and it had to be them all *now.* Oh, God help them.

Connecting each call felt like a hundred years. He had practiced saying all of their names aloud in the months before his fateful calls; molding his mouth around the words until they fit just right. Otherwise he thought his mouth might very well revert back to childhood and he's just say, *Stan? Big Bill? Hey, is this Trashmouth?*

"Hello — Uris residence," Stanley Uris said. His voice was a grown-up voice, deeper and stronger than the voice Mike had been hearing in his dreams. Grown-up Stan sounded vaguely confused, and a little distracted. He was listening with one ear, attention elsewhere. There was some faint noise over the line. Probably he was watching TV. Mike felt guilt churn in his stomach, but he had to do this. *Someone* had to. So he did.

Notes for the Chapter:

And so we reach 1985.

4. Stanley Uris

Summary for the Chapter:

In which Stanley Uris does not get ahead.

Notes for the Chapter:

And here is where things start to really diverge.

Content warning: this chapter contains a retelling of Stanley's bath and all that comes with that territory. Warnings for suicidal ideation and continuous suicidal thoughts; self-harm; fatalistic thinking; a suicide attempt; his wife's reaction to said attempt.

Bill Denbrough woke up in what was for him the middle of the night, because there was pain in his forearm so acute that he felt like he was on fire.

He tossed the blankets off him, gasping, and Audra sat up beside him, blearily rubbing at her eyes.

“Bill?” she said.

Oh God! Bill’s mind was shrieking. *Jesus Christ what did I do I’m bleeding everywhere* — but he wasn’t. The thing was, he realized as he patted down his arm, that it wasn’t *his* pain. It wasn’t a dream, either, because he was still fucking feeling it.

He looked over at Audra, who was blinking at him in sleepy confusion. It wasn’t *her* pain, either.

“Fuck!” He said aloud, and fumbled for the phone.

Mike picked up almost immediately. In Maine, it was the early evening.

“Bill,” Mike said. His voice was shaky, rough. He sounded is if he was the one who’d shot awake in the middle of the night. “You hurt your arm just now?”

“No,” Bill said. “I didn’t. But Mikey — I fuh-*feel* it.”

There was silence over the line for a moment. Then Bill said, “I think it’s Stan.” And they both knew that it was.

“He sounded strange over the phone,” Mike said. His breath hitched, and for a moment Bill thought he was going to break. But he stood strong.

“I’m going to hang up now, Big Bill,” Mike said. “I’m gonna call Patty Uris.”

“Yeah,” Bill said. “Call me back as soon as you can, but I might…I might miss it. I’m on my way over, okay? Right now. Just — hang on.”

“See you,” Mike said, his voice quiet, vague…terrified. There was a click as he set the phone down, and Bill was left alone in his bed with his tired, confused wife beside him.

“That was him again, wasn’t it,” Audra said. “Your childhood friend from Maine. The one you’re seeing in the morning.”

“Yeah,” Bill said. He was staring down as the scar on his palm, willing it to give him an answer to what the Hell just happened. It didn’t. When he and Mike had been talking, the pain had vanished as quickly as it came, but he still felt shaky from the echo of it.

“Except it can’t wait till the morning. Audra, I’m sorry, but I have to go. As soon as I can. I have to be there.” *I have to take their hands. Like we did…a long time ago.*

Audra just looked at him. There was sleep still in her eyes, but worry too, maybe even fear. Bill’s skin prickled into gooseflesh; but he couldn’t comfort her, because she was right to be scared.

Bill kissed his wife chastely on the mouth and then climbed out of bed. “Pick up the phone if it rings, will you? I’m sorry, Audra.” She just nodded in acknowledgement.

*

Stanley Uris did not want to leave his wife. The thought of that had not once flitted across his mind in their years together, that is how far away it was from his worldview. He could be angry or upset with her — or at least he could hypothetically, he couldn't really recall ever actually managing it — and certainly he could be, had been, sad to fail her by not giving her the children he knew she wanted just as much as he did.

But there was no part of him that wanted a life without her. That was a hard thing to reconcile. He was not thinking of it when he folded his clothes up and set them aside.

What he was thinking was simply, *This doesn't make any sense.* What I just remembered can't possibly be true, because it fundamentally does not make sense. But he knew also that it *was* true, and therein lay the problem. The creature that was not a bird (— was not even a spider —) could not exist in any version of the world that Stan could accept. It was evil, it was vile, but more than anything, it was *impossible*.

Terror did not give due justice to the feeling that gripped Stan Uris. It was a full-on, total mental *rejection* that he felt.

The problem of It was simply too big a problem for Stan to comprehend, let alone solve. He wanted *out.* (He thought — Hell he *knew* that it was not simply a difficult problem, but that it was an impossible one — how do you stop something that cannot exist to begin with?) He was a fool for ever thinking such things could be possible, but then, children were allowed such fool's dreams. He was an adult now and could not lie to himself like that. If he returned to Derry, that would be marching to his death, and marching beside him would be the best friends he'd ever had.

Who the fuck could stomach that? He couldn't see their faces again. He desperately did not want to. To see how they changed, how they grew, only to have it be snuffed away as it certainly would be — oh God what sort of monster would he be to want that?

The only way to do this would be remotely kind would be something painless, like taking too many pills or breathing in carbon monoxide. But he didn't have those on hand. There was a set of razors under the sink. He had never thought of using them to hurt himself before, but now in his determined haze he took one out and held it by the blade; the sharp edge cut slightly into the tip of his pointer finger, drawing some tiny amount of blood. He felt nothing over the steady pounding of his pulse.

I'm so sorry, my darling, Stanley Uris thought, because of course he had already decided on what he was going to do. It would hurt her — God it would gut her even if it didn't hurt her physically but it *would* — but he had to. He didn't know how not to do what he was about to do, no matter how cruel and unimaginable it was.

He would be fast. He could give her that much, at least. He turned and locked the door, something he never did. He would cut deep and cut fast. It was still a monstrous cruelty but his mind was already screaming at him; he was on the verge of total collapse. It was the best he could do and he prayed to whoever was listening that it would be enough, that Patricia Blum Uris would be alright.

Stan turned the knob of the bath with steady hands. His mind, now that the act was beginning, fell — not quiet, but quieter. The screaming became a dull roar. It sounded to him like peace.

The pain that came was so sharp and so sudden that the can of beer in Patty Uris' hand tumbled from her suddenly-loose grip and clattered to the floor. It did not burst, but she would not have cared in the slightest if it had.

The spare key turned in the lock, and Patty threw open the door; her speed and boldness implying a courage that did not exist.

Her husband was sitting in the drawn bath. The water was pink with his blood. There was a flash of silver blade in his — Oh God in his —

“Stanley?” she said, like a question, and he stared up at her with wide dark eyes.

Stanley shook himself like he was coming out of a trance, and he said, “Patty?” with the razor blade still stuck in the flesh of his arm.

Patty made a sound like a wounded animal, and Stan’s mouth parted slightly in surprise or pain or horror. Patty was frozen for a long horrendous moment, and then she grabbed at the hand towel they kept by the sink because she had no idea what else to do. She wrapped the cloth around her husband’s wound and pressed tight, pretending that she couldn’t still see the wound in her mind’s eye.

“The hospital,” she said in a desperate gasp. It was like her mind was working in half-time. “I have to — to call —” as she said it she became aware that in the other room, the phone was ringing.

But the Turtle can’t help us? She thought, absurdly. And then. *It’s Stan’s old friend calling him back, I just know it.* She was of course correct on both counts.

“I’m sorry,” her husband was saying, sounding dazed beneath her hands. “I was trying to be quick.”

She wanted to vomit all over the floor of their bathroom but she swallowed once, twice, three times, and then she said, “Will you keep pressure on it while I go call?”

Stanley nodded at her. She stared at him for a long moment, because as awful as it was — she couldn’t trust him. She couldn’t. But she had to.

There was a long horrible ride to the hospital in which Patty wanted

to hold her husband's hand, but couldn't. There was noise and commotion and busy EMTs being very kind to her but she couldn't hear them, she couldn't process what they were saying. Everything was loud and overwhelming in her mind Stanley's blood was staining the bathwater pink and the sides of the bath pink and the floor of the bathroom bright red. She heard a telephone ringing, in her mind, and she thought, *I should call his friend back and tell him what happened.* It was an absurd thing to think; if she should call anyone it should obviously be Stan's parents or her parents but — but God she felt there were others out there, too, that needed to know what was happening.

Every now and then the sharp pain of Stan's arm cut into her thoughts and she'd clutch helplessly at her forearm. One of the emergency workers saw her doing it and looked at her with pity in his eyes; she thought maybe that made him increase Stanley's pain medication because the sharp horrible ripping pain of it faded into a dull ache. They pulled up to the hospital and got ready to unload; Patty leaned forward towards Stan's stretcher and said, "I love you, Stanley." *Please stay with me. If that's too hard —* she wanted to say that she would forgive him. But she was not sure that she would, and she found that she could not say it.

*

On the other side of the country, Rich Tozier was gearing up to leave. He was stressed out of his god-damned gourd and he was pretty sure that if he tried to eat anything in the next three-to-five hours, it'd come right back up, but — still. He was going to Derry, and panicking about it only mildly.

At one point, he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his arm, and thought, *What the fuck? Did I pull a muscle packing?* Even though the only packing he'd really done was throwing clothing into a duffel. *My soulmate?* — he thought blankly, then shook his head as if to clear it. He was starting to remember something, but his mind was resistant to it. And unlike Stanley Uris and Michael Hanlon, there was no

knowledge at his core about any Other being that could help or not help him.

His mind was racing on without him, like it had so often when he was a strange and impulsive child who specialized in very poor impressions. At the airport, he wore sunglasses and tried not to speak to anyone when not remotely necessary — for the first time in a long time, he was terrified that something completely unexpected might leap off his tongue.

Eddie Kaspbrak felt more free behind the wheel of his borrowed limousine than he had in a long time. He was trying not to think about that, though. (He was mostly failing).

He thought instead about the asthma attack he had almost had on the train over. He was thinking about the way the man across from him had looked at him, and he was trying to process how that made him feel. He didn't have the words for it; for the strange embarrassment and shame — but then, there were a great many things that Eddie experienced but did not have words for. It was sort of his specialty. He was usually quite good at not thinking of it, but now he was floundering. And just when he really needed to be brave, too.

He bit his lip until it hurt. He wanted to draw blood, but found he couldn't. It was all so very absurd.

When a brief spasm of pain sliced up his left forearm, he ignored it.

There were times when, in being friends with someone in as fragile of a situation as Beverly Marsh was in, you were worried. And then there were other times when you were terrified.

Kay McCall was terrified.

She was terrified that her friend — a beautiful woman, a smart woman, a clever funny nicotine-addicted total *jerk* of a woman —

was going to be killed by her shitbag husband and maybe that thought was in the back of her mind all the goddamned time but this time it was real, this time it really might happen.

Kay McCall wanted to cry, but she didn't.

She didn't feel any pain when Tom Rogan hit his wife, because she and Beverly were not soulmates. But they were *friends* and so she was knees-knocking, hair-pulling, goosebumps-raising *terrified*.

*

"Mrs. Uris," someone was saying forcefully, "you need to sit down."

Patty sat. Her mind was so tired of screaming and screaming and beating its fists around the closed walls of her thoughts that when told to do something by an authoritative tone, she simply did it.

"Where's Stanley?" she said. If she got an answer, she couldn't hear it. "I need to call his parents," she pleaded. She wondered, vaguely, if she was crying. She thought she might be, but she couldn't feel her face, so she couldn't really tell. Her forearm hurt rather a lot. She pressed a hand to it, but that didn't help.

*

Ben Hanscom had really hoped that the whiskey would help. Help with *what*, he was less clear on. The silver dollars were part of it. Definitely, the silver dollars were part of it. And Beverly was part of it. Oh, that's right — he was starting to remember Beverly. He was thinking of an ankle bracelet on a preteen leg. No, actually — he wasn't thinking of that. That was what the whiskey was for. He was trying not to remember.

Mostly, he was failing.

Worst of all, he knew he didn't really *want* to fail. He *wanted* to remember. He missed his friends. The pain that sliced down his arm hadn't scared him off. He wanted to run towards it and use his hands to mend it like he used his hands to build things. He could do it, dammit. He fucking wanted to.

Bill Denbrough was an ungodly number of miles above the Earth, going faster than man had the right to go, and he was pissed off at his seatmate for catching him a few times with his elbow. It was all so stupid. He felt more insane than he had felt in a long time. Since his brother died, maybe. He'd been just a kid then. A stupid stuttering kid. God, it was all starting to come back. He wished it wouldn't, but when his mind caught on each memory, he refused to let them go. He kept thinking about Stanley and then wishing he hadn't. He kept thinking of Audra and then wishing he hadn't. He kept thinking of Mike and wishing he could call him back already.

There were more important things that Beverly Marsh could be thinking of than a poem that a boy had written her when she was eleven years old. Certainly there were. But she couldn't get her mind to settle on them; she kept imagining a flash of silver in the dark dampness, and her mind would skitter away from it like a frightened animal. Hell, she *felt* like a frightened animal.

But the poem made her feel safe. So it did. She had a hand pressed against the screaming pain in her arm for a good half hour (the pain itself faded, but she was oddly terrified that it might come back, so she kept her hand pressed close —), but still in some strange and probably foolish way she felt safe.

*

Patty Uris did not pick up the phone. In fact, no one at all at the Uris residence had picked up the phone. Mike should've expected this, but he hadn't. It was possible he'd been distracted by the knife-edge of blistering pain that'd seared up his arm. He hadn't expected that — and he'd expected a lot of things. He tried to be prepared. He had seven helmets all lined up and ready to protect their wearers on a trip down under Derry, Maine. He was currently feeling sick to his stomach with the idea that he might not need all seven.

Oh God, he thought, *Oh Jesus, what have I done?* He didn't really believe in God, not in the easy way he had as a child, at least. But he had to talk to *someone*, and Patty Uris had not picked up the phone, and Bill Denbrough was on a supersonic flight across the Atlantic ocean. So yeah, maybe Michael Hanlon, the little church boy — maybe he prayed.

(There were forces listening that could not do anything. Events on Earth would unfold as they always had — complicated, messy, terrible and beautiful; informed by love but not shaped by it.)

*

Stanley Uris woke up. He did not open his eyes. He knew instantly that he was not at home, in the bed he shared with his wife. The clinical scent of the hospital room sat heavy in his nose. He remembered something he'd heard about suicidal people — that those who jumped off bridges found themselves desperately regretful on the way down, that they found they wanted to live in the seconds before they hit the ground.

Perhaps that was true for *them*. But Stanley Uris did not want to open his eyes into the world that he had awoken to. The unsolvable problem was still there. He still couldn't fix it, and he still couldn't

comprehend it, and now he hurt. He ached. He knew Patty was aching too, and maybe — (definitely) — that was the worst of it.

Eventually, Patricia Blum Uris had to go home, to the little place with the nice yew hedges that she had *made* into a home with her husband. She just went to grab a change of clothes. She did also want to shower, but she couldn't manage it. She couldn't go into the bathroom at all. She took a spare toothbrush from her drawer and she brushed her teeth with only water in the kitchen sink. She was there for less than an hour, but it was like fate was leaning towards her side after all (even if God had not fixed things like she'd begged Him to), because during that short window, the telephone rang.

Patty answered it in a daze. "Uris residence," she said. It couldn't be her mother. She'd called her mother from the hospital, and she and her father were already on their way down from New York.

"Am I speaking to Patricia Uris?" the voice on the line said.

She supposed the voice was technically correct. "Yes," she said.

The voice turned gentle. "Hi," it said. "I'm Mike Hanlon. You don't know me, but your husband and I were friends when we were kids. Back when he lived in Derry. I'm just calling because I'm a little worried about him."

There was a silence over the line, in which she said nothing.

"Am I right to be worried?" Mr. Hanlon said.

She had thought she was through crying for the night, but now she was thinking she might start back up again. She wasn't sure there was enough liquid left in her worn-thin body to produce tears; but she could always just start wailing, maybe rip out her hair and dress in rags.

"Yes," she said in the terrible choked-up thing that was her voice now. "Yes," she told the stranger over the line who she kind of hated because she was sure, she was *sure* that he was the person who had

spoken to Stanley right Before.

“Stanley,” she said, “he—” but she could not say it. Telling her mother had been bad enough.

“Is he alive?” Mike Hanlon asked. His voice cracked just a little. He was choked up. He was trying not to cry. She couldn’t hate him anymore.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s in the hospital. I have to be getting back there, you know.”

“I’m sure,” Mike said. “I’m...I’m sorry to be calling at all. But would you mind…” she had an odd thought, which was that this sort of hesitance seemed almost out of character for him. “I mean, could you, I mean when you see Stan…could you tell him that Mike sends his love? And, uh, Bill Denbrough, too, and all the rest — he’ll know.”

He would know. A slick thread of fear had shivered up her spine at the naming of that novelist Stan had been reading.

“Stuttering Bill,” she said into the phone. She couldn’t help it.

“What?” Mike Hanlon, off his guard again. “He must’ve...shit. I guess he remembered.” He sounded in awe of something. In awe of her husband. Patty felt tears prick at her eyes. She really was getting so very tired of crying.

“I’ll tell him,” she said. “When he — when he wakes up. He’s sleeping now. That’s why I left.” She thought that if her husband would just let her see him awake she could talk to him about anything, even something as dangerous as his friends apparently were.

“Thank you,” Mike said, steadily. “I appreciate that Patty, and I’m sorry you’re going through this. I won’t call again, but can you maybe call me back, when — uh. When you feel up to it?” She thought he probably had been going to say, *When this is all over.*

She told Mike Hanlon that she could do that and she carefully wrote down the number at which he could be reached. Then she gathered up her bag and a few things of Stanley’s that she thought he might

like, his watch and his glasses and a sweater he was fond of. For some reason, her hand lingered near a worn old book that, when she tugged it out of the bookshelf to see its cover, turned out to be an encyclopedia of birds. But she hadn't seen Stan touch that in years, so she left it. All his things would be waiting for him when he — when he came home.

*

Take a good look son, this is your hometown. Well, it wasn't *yet*. He was still on the wide-open road with his hands curled into a tight grip on the wheel. There was a ways to go yet. *Come on home.*

Richie 'Records' Tozier was creating a mental list of songs centered around, thematically, the conceit of returning home after a time or distance away. It was getting pretty good, if he did say so himself. Only it was a fact that heading to Derry didn't really feel like heading home. Home was his nice big overpriced apartment, which meant Derry was just the place where the worst thing that had ever happened to him had occurred.

Great! Richie thought. He smiled a thin and unconvincing smile at his own traitorous internal monologue. Better get home before it's dark. *Homeward bound.* Wish I wasn't, though. *We gotta get out of this place.*

At his home in Derry, Maine, Mike Hanlon hung up the phone. He was tired of telephones and phone calls. He wondered who would make it back first, which of his friends would bless him with their voice in person, with their presence. He wished that whoever it was would hurry it the Hell up. He could feel the train barreling towards them all now, expect that metaphor was no good, no good at all — there was not something outside of Derry coming in to get them; it was Derry itself that was poised to attack. Or maybe it was like a

water-spout, the kind that they had at Yellowstone, the kind he'd never seen because he was stuck here.

Beneath the Earth that his house was built on, It was shifting and moving and Mike knew — oh, he had always known, really — that he and as many of the lucky seven as could make it had to go down, Down, into-the-black, and cut off Its head before the water-spout of evil erupted into the air. It was the only way. One step after the other. *Come on now, Mikey.*

He rubbed at his forearm, although it did not hurt. Then he pressed at the scars on his palm, although they didn't hurt, either. It was not a nervous habit so much as a grounding technique. He was scared suddenly that it was going to stop working, because even Mike had forgotten a lot and he was just now starting to remember how much that coke bottle had pained him.

Stanley had made them promise, but now Stanley was sleeping or pretending to sleep in a hospital bed in Atlanta. He wasn't going to show up.

What the fuck have I done? Mike Hanlon thought, and he waited, feeling like a ticking time-bomb, for the rest of his friends to arrive.

5. Recollections

Summary for the Chapter:

> The Losers begin to remember -- whether they like it or not.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Content warnings: References to violent homophobia & explicitly homophobic violence (in the form of Adrian Mellon's death).

Big Bill walked in the room Mike had rented at *Jade of The Orient*, and Richie Tozier thought he looked just grand. There was a disorienting moment at first, actually, where the room seemed to sort of spin and tilt -- not like when you were falling-over drunk but more like when you were dreaming. In that moment he was once again some skinny weirdo with a smart mouth and a habit of getting the shit kicked out of him…a real loser, as they say. And Bill was too, with his too-intense kid eyes, and pretty Bevvie with her ratty sweatshirts and Ben hiding his body and Eddie wheezing in the background sounding like a goddamn tea-kettle...and Stan, who he'd been kind of a shit to sometimes, but who he had deeply loved. *Well, fuck.* The Loser's Club was back, baby. Or, well -- almost.

"So," he said, evenly, "Anyone wanna talk about the slice up the forearm we all felt? Or at least, I hope we all felt that, or I've got some self exploration to --"

Before he could finish his sentence, Beverly cut in: "I felt it, too." When he turned to look at her, her face was stunningly pale, the spattering of freckles across her nose standing out like stars in a clear night sky.

Around the table, everyone else was nodding. Except for Eddie, he noted, but Eddie was frowning down at his arm like it'd offended him, so Richie was willing to bet it had pained him, too.

"Yes," Mike said, evenly, "I think we all felt that, Rich." He glanced over at Bill when he said it, like any moment now he was expecting

Bill to step in, take control like he had when they were kids.

“So whatzit mean?”

“It means that we can’t all be here,” Mike said, coolly and a collective shudder ran through the five of them. Richie saw it in Bill’s eyes.

Mike pursed his lips, and then he made a gesture at Bill, and the both of them sat down next to each other at the table.

“Stan Uris couldn’t make it,” Mike said, his voice real quiet, “because right now he’s at a hospital in Atlanta. After he took my phone call, he went into the bathroom, and he tried to slice open his wrists. His wife -- his soulmate -- got to him in time, so he’s alive, although he lost a lot of blood. He’s not going to make it to Derry, but he’ll live.”

Mike looked up, meeting their eyes one by one. At least, anyone who would -- Eddie was still looking down at the table, his mouth pressed shut in a horrible thin line.

“Fuck,” Beverly said into the ensuing silence. She looked like she wanted to cry, but her eyes were dry.

“I think the lady speaks for all of us,” Richie said. Suddenly, he was parched. He reached for the beer he’d ordered when they were all waiting; it tasted like nothing on his tongue.

“I know,” Mike said. “It’s...well. It’s awful. We faced something so terrible that Stan wanted out rather than to face it. But I wouldn’t have called you guys back here if I didn’t think I had to.”

“We know that,” Bill said. He placed a reassuring hand on Mike’s elbow, and Richie watched the look they shared. “It’s not your fault, Mike.”

“Feels like it,” Mike said, softly. Richie winced. Mike had grown up into a short, tired-faced man with kind eyes, and it was all sorts of unfair that these burdens weighed so heavily on him. But as he looked around the table at Bev and Ben and Eddie he thought, Well, none of the rest of us could’ve done it. Even Big Bill -- maybe he was too tired out from carrying all that weight the first time around.

The first time around *what*, exactly? The -- the first time against *It*, of course.

“Let’s eat,” Mike said, into the heady discomfit of the room. “Let’s talk over food. I think it’ll make us feel better.”

Like clockwork, the waitress appeared, and Mike ordered for them all. They let him, looking at each other with tired and scared eyes, but with no small amount of curiosity, too -- Richie surely was not the only one wondering what his childhood buddies had got up to in the meantime, in the great distance between their youth and their adulthood.

*

For a while -- Bill wasn’t sure how long, actually, because it had felt so *easy* -- for a while they ate and laughed and drank and it was something really lovely, something glorious -- everything you’d ever dream returning home would ever be. Of course, returning home could never be so easy at that, so it couldn’t last.

“Are we not going to talk about it?”

They all startled, looking at Eddie, for of course it was Eddie who had spoken.

“Talk about what, Eddie?” Mike said, carefully. Bill thought he said the way one might talk to a startled animal.

Eddie grasped his aspirator in one hand, almost reflexively. Bill wondered if it was a nervous habit, one that he did all the time -- in front of his wife, maybe.

Eddie gritted his teeth. “We *felt* it. Even I...well. I ignored it. But when Stan cut his arm, we felt it right *then*, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Ben said, abruptly. “We did. I know we did -- at the same time as he was hurting himself, we all hurt too.”

“It’s like we were soulmates,” Beverly said. No one responded to her, and she chewed her lip as she looked around at all of them, her eyebrows raised in nervous questioning. “I mean -- it is, isn’t it? Like we’re platonic soulmates. Right?”

And it was true. Undeniably, it was true. Hell, the idea had been floating in the back of Bill’s mind since it had happened; he was a man without a soulmate but he’d been reared -- like everyone else -- on tales of shared pain; occasionally shared pleasure, but mostly -- that shared suffering; physical hurt stretched between two people. In this case -- it was stretched between seven. But how could that be so?

Bill turned towards Mike. He was frowning, clearly about to speak. “There’s something…” Mike said. “Clearly, there’s always been something, sort of...tying us together. I don’t want to say that it’s just fate or what have you, because we *chose* each other, I know we did, but -- I mean. We were seven children in the right place at the right time. There was something backing us up, wasn’t there?”

“Yes,” Bill said, although for the life of him he couldn’t remember any details. “Thuh-there *was*. I know there was...in the sewers…” he trailed off, lost in the sudden, confusing influx of half-baked memories.

“Maybe that’s what it was,” Mike said. His dark eyes met Bill’s ever-so-briefly, and Bill nodded, pretending that he knew what the Hell he was talking about. “Maybe it...replicated the soulmate bond. I don’t know! Maybe it *was* just our friendship. Or some combination of those two things. All I know is that it hurt like Hell...but Stan’s still alive.”

“Stan the man,” Beverly said, her voice wavering. “I...I wish he was here. He’d definitely have an opinion on this, you know?”

“Yeah,” Richie’s voice came, unexpectedly. When Bill looked over at him, he was frowning down intently at his plate. “That old romantic! He’d have an idea if it had to do with soulmates.” He spoke very authoritatively, as if from experience. Bill bit down on the urge to ask for clarification.

“He would,” Bill said, in lieu of asking. “We all know he would. And we wish he was here. But we can’t ask for everything…” he faltered, there, because in truth he had no idea how to fix this. How was he supposed to make something alright when it so clearly was not alright at all?

Mike took up the reins -- like he had been this whole time, really; staying in Derry like a sacrificial lamb that went willingly. “I wouldn’t have called you here if it wasn’t serious,” he said. “It is. Truly it is. I don’t -- I know it’s hard, without Stan. But I need as much of you as you can give. If you need to leave -- fine. But --”

Around the table, the Losers were shifting. Richie nodded his head, like he had expected it. Beverly was watching with widened eyes; Ben looking between her and Mike with laser focus. Eddie had loosened his grip on his aspirator to eat and he was holding chopsticks delicately between his fingers like they were weapons he didn’t want to touch; his eyes darting between the food and whoever was speaking. He knew that they were all thinking slow, terrifying thoughts; feeling the doubts and fears of every horrible fucking thing that Derry had to offer -- terribly, Bill found himself nodding, too.

“We know, Mikey,” he said, in his slow practiced voice. He knew the stutter would catch up with him, soon, but he was glad to get that sentence out while he still could. “We know. We’ll fight It with you, okay?”

It. The pronoun, wielded like an ax. Dripping with fear like Stanley Uris’ dead boy in the Standpipe had dripped with water. That was It, the thing-the-being, underneath Derry. A spider sitting fat and happy in its murderous web.

*

Ben really didn’t want to leave them. He got what Mike was saying, understood his perspective and his ideas, but, in truth -- he simply could not bring himself to want them to split up. He imagined,

(somewhat absurdly), herding all the Losers down into the clubhouse that he'd just remembered, and making everyone sit there until this all blew over.

Only, he knew that this wouldn't blow over. And Stan was still in Georgia, anyway.

Ben frowned down at the dirt, kicking at nothing with the hard toe of his boot. He didn't want to go to the library, a place he'd spent so much time alone -- not *bad* times, but he'd just got his friends *back*. And now…

And now *what?*

Going to the library was *not* a mistake. That's what he kept telling himself as he was walking away from it, anyway; he thought probably he'd got out of it what Mike had sort of expected him to get out of it -- some memories coming back, accompanied by a healthy heaping of fear to go with it. But by golly, it didn't feel so good. Made him feel like real bugshit, actually.

It was such a bad, heavy, feeling that he wasn't watching where he was going, and right outside the Derry Town House he tripped and sprawled, his knees slamming into pavement with a stupidly sharp spike of pain. Ben was not a clumsy man, and the last time he'd fallen like that he's been far less sober than he was now. He spent a moment just feeling it, reeling in the spiral of pain and knowing it was the sort of pain that hit hard but would fade if he only waited it out. He blinked harshly down at the dark pavement, trying to make sense of his thoughts. Maybe he *did* feel almost drunk.

And then out of the darkness a hand extended itself towards him; a soft, warm, *familiar* hand.

"Looks like you had about a good of a time out there as I did," Beverly said, smiling ruefully as she helped Ben to his feet.

(There was still a small nervous part of him that said that she should not touch him, and surely she could not bear his weight --)

“Yeah,” was all Ben said to her. He was still looking off into the dark distance instead of into her eyes. It was possible he was afraid of what he might see, if he looked at her properly.

He tried to smile back at her, but it seemed that his face was simply unwilling to cooperate.

“Where did you go?” she said. Now that they were both standing, he had to look down to see her, which was still sort of strange. “I went...Hm. I went to my parent’s apartment. My dad lived there for a long time.”

“But not anymore?” Ben said. He had been steadily remembering what he thought of Beverly’s father -- nothing good. Nothing good at all.

“No,” she said, after a brief pause. “No, not anymore.” He waited for her to continue, but she didn’t.

He smiled at her, trying to put her at ease. “I went to the library. I don’t think you ever visited that old place with me, but it was pretty important to me when I was a kid.”

Beverly smiled up at him. He watched the way her mouth curved; the way the little dimple appeared in her cheek. “That’s good! I’m glad you had some place to go, since -- I mean. Since you were so alone.”

Ouch. It was true, though. “Yeah,” he said. It was cold out. He was starting to shiver, but Beverly didn’t seem to feel it. Not that he could particularly tell -- she had turned bodily away from him when he wasn’t looking; her shoulders hunched against him.

“It was…” he didn’t know how to describe it. “At first, it was like I was a ghost, returning to haunt my old spots…and then I saw him, too.”

Beverly spun on a heel, her eyes wide. So wide and scared. “Him...the clown?”

“Yeah…” Ben couldn’t stop looking into her eyes. Something was unnerving about them -- she was so scared that it was frightening in itself --

“Did he talk to you? He…it…talked to me,” Beverly said. She reached a hand up, scratching thoughtlessly at the side of her face like it was itching her.

“He told jokes,” Ben said. “It wasn’t very funny, though.”

Beverly laughed. “I guess it wouldn’t be, huh? There’s nothing very funny about this situation.”

“There really isn’t.” Everything was so stunted, and Ben suddenly just wanted to get out of this conversation, escape up the stairs to his room, before Beverly realized -- before she recognized what a pathetic strange man she was talking too.

“It’s sad, really,” Beverly mused. She tapped a slender finger against her lips; he couldn’t look away. “I mean, what a pity, right…that you’re going to die alone!”

Ben heard her say that as if from very far away. “Bev?”

Beverly’s smile widened into a grin, then kept widening. He was pretty sure her yellow blouse had been un-decorated a moment before, but now it had red pom-poms sprouting down its middle.

“Beverly isn’t fucking *here*, you pathetic fool,” she said. “Oh! Poor little Benny! You grew up and thought she’d *liiiike* you, huh?” Pennywise the clown leaned up towards Ben’s face, Beverly’s face coated in white greasepaint and her mouth growing fangs.

“She *won’t,* ” Pennywise hissed, and then he stood on his toes -- on Bev’s toes -- and he gripped the sides of Ben’s face. “You thought growing up and getting pretty would be enough for her to like you? Our darling Mrs. Rogan isn’t that shallow. If she *was* she’d never have married Tom!”

Pennywise clenched clawed fingers against Ben’s cheeks, and pulled him in to kiss him. Ben couldn’t move, couldn’t blink; he was like a fucking statue and the horrible Thing still had Beverly’s face and *hewastouchingitOhGod* --

It broke the kiss and wrenched Beverly’s head back on her neck, cackling in joy and excitement. His lipstick was smeared, and Ben

could feel it on his lips. For a moment he was still frozen, frozen, *frozen,* but then some remnant of the eleven year old who wrote a little poem in the Derry Public Library reared his head and Ben squeezed his eyes tight shut and bellowed, "*No!* "

He reached out blindly until his hands felt Its shoulders and he shoved it away from him. "No! *Leave me alone!* I never wanted this! *Beverly is my friend!"*

"Your *friend?!* " The clown was laughing when Ben opened his eyes. "Don't play with little old Bobbie, he knows the difference between friends and lovers!"

The clown started jumping up in down in some horrible happy dance. "Lovers! Girlfriends! That's what *you* want, I *know!* Except --" and the grin it grinned was finally just its own wicked smile, not Beverly's at all. "You just want the one. *Juuust* Beverly! How romantic! Is she your *soulmate*?"

Ben's heart was still going a mile a minute from merely touching the damn thing on its shoulders. Desperately, he reached up and wiped at the side of his face. His hand came away a horrible mixture of red and white.

"No," the clown said, and now his smile was an exaggerated frown. "She isn't, is she…Oh, poor Benny. All alone! Old Bobbie, he knows that feeling too...and soon you'll be joining him." The frown deepened, becoming impossible and crooked and *evil.* "Soon you'll be joining ME!"

Pennywise gave a sudden terrible grin once more, and then he pressed a hand over his mouth, tilting it towards Ben like he was blowing a kiss his way.

Ben, his heart pounding like mad; tears springing to his eyes -- he blinked. When he opened his eyes, Pennywise was gone, and he was standing alone in the lawn of the Derry Town House, once more.

*

Mike Hanlon had not manifested a soul-mark yet, and at this point he suspected he never would. He didn't mind so much -- he got the idea of it, the high-romance of it all, but it wasn't really *him.* Perhaps that was just the isolation of a town librarian speaking, but even if they *did* miraculously manage to get out of this situation alive, he thought he'd like to take normal life slow. There was Carole, of course, and he thought it'd be nice to go on a date with her, maybe even make love once or twice, but they weren't *soulmates*. The fact that they weren't took the pressure off nicely.

He watched Bill, bent in concentration over the 7-buck bicycle repair kit and lost from the rest of the world around him. "Hey, Big Bill -- can I ask you something?"

Bill blinked away from Silver as if coming out of a trance. "Huh? Oh, yeah, ask away, Mikey."

"You and your wife soulmates? Feel free to tell me to fuck off if it's too personal."

Bill laughed, turning fully to face Mike, and leaned back on his hands. "I guess it is personal, but we've never really been too cagey about it. No, we're not -- I don't have a soul-mark, and she has a faded one."

Mike winced a little at that. "I'm sorry. She ever get to know her soulmate?"

Bill shook his head. "No -- it manifested and then faded only a month later. She never found out who it was." He chewed his lip, pondering. "I thought that was pretty damn sad when I heard it, but she handled it well for the most part. Audra's a trooper. Plus she…wasn't at her best at the time it manifested. She said she would've been embarrassed to meet anyone then, much less her soulmate." Bill neglected to mention that she had in fact met *him* less than a year after this.

"If a soulmate's love is as pure as the stories say, then I'm sure whoever it was wouldn't have judged her."

Bill smiled. Mike wondered if he realized how fond he looked when he thought of his wife. “Still. That sort of sweeping narrative is a lot of pressure, right? Honestly, I’m glad I don’t have a soul-mark.”

Mike laughed. “Can’t say I don’t feel the same.”

“That mean there’s no one in your life here in Derry?’

“Nope,” Mike said, popping the ‘p’. Bill didn’t need to be regaled with tales of inter-library almost-romances.

“Aw, that’s too bad, Mikey.”

Mike laughed, and that made Bill grin -- which was the reaction he’d wanted. “I thought we just both agreed that maybe that was fine?”

Bill had one hand on the wheel of his old bike, but the other tap-tapped nervously on the floor. “I really think it is, honestly. I just want you to be happy, though -- I mean, Hell, after all this shit you deserve it, right?”

Mike smiled, and then bent down to grasp the wheel-pump in his hands. “Well, I’d like to think I do. But I don’t know, Bill -- isn’t getting everyone back here enough to ask for, right now?”

Bill’s eyes flicked over him, and then he lifted the pump gently out of Mike’s hands. “I guess you’re right,” he said. “It just kinda feels like we’re all barely h-holding it together, you know?”

“Yeah,” Mike said. He set his hand down on his knees and watched Bill continue the work. This was what he’d been waiting for, but it still felt foreign and odd. “I know, Billy.” He hadn’t called Bill that in nearly thirty years.

He swallowed, nervously -- he kept half-expecting the clown to jump out of every shadow. But they were alone, apart from the quiet ticking of Silver's spinning wheels.

*

There was a version of this story where, Richie assumed, he would've made eye contact with Eddie at the *Jade* and it all would've come rushing back instantaneously. Movie magic. Except that there already was too much magic in the version of the story that he was living, and anyway, if it'd happened like that...well! It'd be a love story.

But this was really not that sort of tale. At least he was trying to convince himself that it wasn't.

It was strange, the way it was coming back -- it seemed to be happening the same way to all of them (perhaps it hadn't for Stan and that was why -- but he couldn't think about that); the memories coming back in stages. The information was all there, he knew it was, but it was like fog on an old winding road or something; he could only see so far ahead of him.

He had to take out his contacts, but he couldn't remember just yet why the pain was so familiar.

He pressed a hand to his hip, absently, like he often did, and he remembered --

Oh, fuck. He remembered standing ankle-deep in a stream of his own making, dirty-cold water numbing his feet, and he had looked up and he had seen his soulmate.

Eddie.

Oh!

Eddie, Eddie, Eddie; and briefly and suddenly Rich Tozier's mind lost all capacity for anything other than a hurried stream of recollection, a barrage like opened floodgates; *Eddie my love!* There was teasing and playing and lying next to each other, sharing comic books and listening to Little Richard on Richie's radio, and *Jesus fucking Christ, how the Hell could he ever have forgotten?*

"Eds?" He said, out loud; his voice trembled with it. Tears were pricking at his eyes, and fuck that, fuck crying so much more in a few days than he had in a literal decade, but --

Eddie! His mind sang it, and it sounded a little like love. He loved all his friends, of course, and -- no, actually, let Records Tozier sit with that one for a minute, *he loved his friends,* and among even them, Eddie was special.

A shiver ran down Richie's spine. He shoved his glasses up and rubbed at his eyes. Oh, what the Hell was he supposed to do with this?

He was so shaken-up that he almost missed the pamphlet being proffered into his hands. For a long moment, he just stared at the paper blankly; then the man who handed to him said, "You'll come, won't you?"

Richie stared down at it. "Huh?" he said. The flyer seemed to have *RICHIE TOZIER'S ALL-DEAD ROCK SHOW* blazoned across the front of it, but that was impossible.

Richie looked up and met Adrian Mellon's eyes.

That man was dead, of course; he was in fact one of the most crucial points in Mike's story. Richie had looked at the photograph of the murdered man because when Mike mentioned him, Eddie had clasped at his aspirator. So it was utterly impossible for Adrian to be standing in front of Richie right then.

Admittedly, he *did* look dead. His face was too-pale; his lip purple-blue; there were blood- and gore- stains all down his front.

"Hullo, Richie," Adrian said. "You're really looking lively. Looking alive, I mean. You'll come, right?"

He stuck out his hand again, and there was a blood splatter on it. Richie took the pamphlet, wordlessly.

"I *do* hope you'll come," Pennywise said out of Adrian Mellon's mouth. "I *do* hope so. It just wouldn't be the same without *you* there, Rich, it really wouldn't. D'you know why? I mean, d'you know

WHY?"

"Shut up!" Richie said, and pretended it didn't come out pained, like he was talking around razor blades embedded in his throat. "You're not even a very good clown, when was the last time you told a joke that was actually *funny* --"

The clown's eyes widened into impossible circles. "Not *funny*, you say? Oh but Richie, it's just a little game we're playing! Like looking in a fun-house mirror!" And suddenly the clown wasn't Adrian Mellon at all; it was Richie, he was looking at his own *face* --

"You know what happens to little boys like you in Derry, don't you?" Adrian-Richie said, and then he grinned.

Richie thought his hands might be shaking but he wasn't sure -- he couldn't see them. He wanted to throw up, but his couldn't make his body move enough to manage even that. He could only take a single stuttering step back, away from It.

"You KNOW, Richie! You KNOW!" The monster that lived under Derry said, again, smiling its horrible-cruel smile, and Rich Tozier *did* know.

He thought, *So maybe the first time I had sex with a man I was twenty-three years old and I thought it would hurt, I thought he would hurt me, but he was so gentle and he was real sweet with me, he touched the back of my neck and he held me close and he made me breakfast in the the morning but I was still scared.*

Doesn't mean I'm ashamed of it, it just means I know it's not my scene, kid, not my style -- not Records Tozier, yanno? And maybe, maybe it was a long time before I let another man touch me but that's just a coincidence, I like girls better anyway, I mean I always knew --

I always knew --

I always fucking thought *I knew that my soulmate would be a woman because I wanted to fall in love with her and it's different between men, isn't it? It's not real love and that's all I ever fucking wanted. Is that so wrong?*

“Is that a question I see on your face, Richie Tozier?” It said, grinning at him in a horrible reflection of his own smile. “Perhaps Pennywise has the answer! Oh, but I’m just a clown!” Richie’s face shifted, and it was just Adrian again; dead Adrian Mellon, a man Richie had never known and never would know.

“I think your question is about soulmates,” Adrian said. “Isn’t it? My boyfriend was my soulmate, actually. Did you know that, Rich? I bet you didn’t.”

That was true; Richie hadn’t. Suddenly, he was really starting to find it quite difficult to breathe.

“It’s true! Don was my soulmate. I have the mark right here --” Adrian placed a hand over his chest -- “over my heart. Very romantic. Or at least that’s what I thought. You can’t really see it anymore, of course.” He opened his shirt, and underneath it was a bloody red pulp of flesh and muscle and organs.

At that, Richie really did throw up, falling to his knees. He coughed out the last of the bile in his throat and stared back up at Adrian. Was it over yet? Was the nightmare done? Because something like this couldn’t be real.

“You still have your soul-mark,” Adrian said. His voice was so soft now that Richie had to strain his ears to hear it. “How lucky. That’s so *lucky*, Rich.” As he said it, his face shifted once again. But this time it was not to match Richie’s face.

Richie stared up at Eddie; Eddie’s tired face on Adrian’s body.

“No,” he gasped, around the bile.

“*Yes*,” Eddie said. “It’s me, Rich. It’s *always* been me.”

“I know,” Richie said, and horribly, the tears that he’d been fighting before had started to come back. His eyes tickled with them. He blinked furiously. “I’m really sorry, Eds.”

“Don’t call me that!” Eddie said. He raised a hand as if to strike Richie, but Richie didn’t flinch. He noticed that, while Eddie would never in a hundred years wear clothes like Adrian was wearing, the

vision in front of him had a large ruby ring on his pinky finger, just like Eddie.

“I really hate it, you know,” Eddie said, frowning down at Richie in that angry way of his. “It’s really disgusting that you say that shit to me, Rich. It’s almost like you’re a --”

“Stop it!” Richie cried, and he didn’t fucking care that his voice cracked halfway though it. “Shut up! *Shut the fuck up!* You’re not Eddie!”

Eddie-Adrian *smiled.* “That’s true,” he said. “I’m not!” He leaned down, so that his slender body was looming over Richie’s prostrate form. “So what are you so afraid of, Rich?”

He grinned, then stood up straight. He wasn’t very tall but the tight pants made his legs look long; the flashy shirt emphasizing his torso. “Are you afraid of ME, Rich?” Adrian -- because it was just Adrian again -- said. “WELL? Are you?”

He leaned back on his heel and he laughed and laughed and *laughed*; as Richie Tozier slammed his fist into the dirt and screamed into the night air around him until the vision of Adrian Mellon was as gone as Adrian Mellon the man was. Richie stayed there, curled on the ground, for a solid five minutes, until he stopped shaking.

6. 'To the Losers'

Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers propose a toast, then see a familiar face.

Notes for the Chapter:

Content warnings for: homophobia (internalized & externalized), incl. prejudice against people with HIV/AIDS; incl. one slur (a direct book quote); reference to Beverly's abusive father & her abusive husband; reference to suicide & suicidal ideation; self-harm. Please see end notes for details on Eddie's scene.

This chapter is...quite a bit longer than I intended it to be! Turns out a lot of things happen in this book and it's hard to juggle 7+ characters at once, lmao

I.

Eddie Kaspbrak was not thinking about what he had seen at the old overgrown baseball pit. Well, he was trying not to -- it was hard to avoid, harder even than usual. The memories from 1958 kept bubbling up like some terrible geyser; he couldn't suppress him, he'd get carried away in the flood if he tried. He kept trying to shift his thoughts to Derry in general, but that was leading him down a spiral that he was realizing he was terrified to see the end of.

It went like this: at some point in his youth there had been a polio scare in Derry. No swimming pools; limited playtimes -- for a brief and awful moment, Eddie thought wryly, all of Derry had played by his mother's rules. Just toss in a 'no running' too, for good measure, and she'd maybe give it her stamp of approval.

Conversely: at some point in the 1970s, a homosexual flight attendant had sex with too many other men and became Patient Zero, spreading AIDS to men around New York and eventually, the world. He got sick and he made other people sick, too. The contagion was not found in swimming pools but in bath-houses, or in the bedrooms of the incurable, if they were so bold.

Probably, no one had written anything disparaging on the Kissing Bridge about polio. But Eddie was standing on that bridge now, looking at a graffiti that read: AIDS FROM GOD YOU HELLBOUND HOMOS.

He was *making* himself look at it. He didn't know why; there was no utility to it.

Actually, that was a lie. He did know why; it was just one of those things he Didn't Think About. There were so many of them -- it was hard to keep track. And God, he was losing the plot, these last few days -- memories from the past and voices from the past, clamoring in his head for attention.

The leper -- he'd almost forgotten about the leper. That was a terrifying thing in itself, because the leper had scared him right down to his bones when he first saw him. The leper was a man who was sick -- Eddie remembered now, that when he'd told Bill and Richie about seeing it for the first time, they'd thought it was just a regular man. It was not even unreasonable; there were lots of sick people on the earth, after all. Eddie should know, he was one of them.

But the leper was sick with the sort of sickness you got from wanting. From taking, too, but the wanting was important -- because Eddie never took, but Eddie *wanted* . The leper touched men, and the men became sick. Eddie did not touch men, but --

This is the story of how you get sick and die and this story, they've been telling it since you were young, and it marches up and down in your head and it steps in unison and this is what the story says: there was a little boy and he was not very strong, he had always been sickly, and his mother did her damnedest to protect him but she is going to fail. She is about to fail because he's about to do something terrible. Oh God, Eddie, there's something you've always known about yourself, isn't there? Isn't there?

That was the secret; that was the terrible thing -- he was gay, he was a homosexual, he was...he was one of those men. *Wasn't he?* Hadn't he always been? It sent a shudder down his spine, but it was true. Of course it was. It was barely a realization so much as an innate understanding.

Vaguely, almost idly, he wondered if Myra knew. His mother almost certainly had known, before she died. He'd been obvious, hadn't he? Obviously ill.

When he was a child he had once thought, *If I had a soulmate I think it would be another boy.* The thought had been buried so thoroughly and so deeply that it was like an electric shock to realize that he had been almost certainly correct; that there was an explanation for the sort of man he had grown up to be and for the feelings he had grown up to feel. To have a definition is to have meaning, but he did not feel like this had any meaning. (If it did, surely it was the one expressed by some unknown author -- that he was damned.)

Eddie sat down on the Kissing Bridge and he faced away from the graffiti so that he didn't have to see it. He curled in tight against himself, like a child, and then he cried. He let himself cry for a long time; until he was able to uncurl and start thinking about the things that Eddie Kaspbrak Did Not Think About. It felt like knives in his stomach, but he had always been braver and stronger than his mother thought him to be, so he opened his eyes and he looked at himself.

II.

A long way away from Derry, Maine, Patty Uris was dreaming. Her sleep was restless and she was alone in the too-big bed that she was sleeping in, with no one to comfort her.

In her dream she was not alone. She was standing by herself, but there were people all around her. The landscape was a mass of reds and oranges and yellows, the colors of every picture of a desert landscape she'd ever seen. She lifted her water-jug out of the well.

Behind her, a voice came. "Could you spare some water for me?" it said. She spun around, but she saw no one.

"Just a sip. The desert is so dry, and I am tired from traveling many

miles for my master." She turned again and finally saw him; a short, unobtrusive man, watching her with keen eyes.

"Of course," she said. Her voice sounded far away. She let him drink from her cup. When she took it back, the man was still watching her, head tilted slightly to the side -- he was waiting. There was something else she was supposed to say, and once she said it, she would know her soulmate.

A rush of heat overtook her body. The sand was burning her feet. She had to say something. She was looking at the camels standing behind the man. The camels, like the desert, were something she had only seen in pictures.

The sleeping form of Patricia Uris made a small hurt noise and rolled over. If you had been watching her, the moonlight that crept in through the shades would've let you see that her face was wet with tears.

In the dream, Patty shut her eyes but she could still see the desert. She opened them, and turned towards the man. There was perhaps some small part of her that wanted to overturn the jug and spill the water over the hot ground; to watch it seep into the sand; to forget all of this and go on. But that part was not the part that spoke.

"Your camels must be tired from the journey, too," she said. "Let me give them water."

The servant smiled at her, wide and genuine with dancing, pleased eyes. "Oh, thank you!" he said. "Thank you!"

Her hand on the water jug shook. She closed her eyes again, and when she opened them she found herself back in her own bed where she belonged. She barely remembered that she had been dreaming, and did not question the tears on her cheeks, as they had become commonplace.

When she got to the hospital for visiting hours, her mother was already there. That was a blessing, surely.

“Momma,” she said, although she hadn’t called her mother something so childish in years and years, “I don’t know what to do.” Her voice was getting all caught-up in her throat, trapped there like a caged animal. *He almost died!* Her mind said against the walls of its trap. *Please help me!* Was she talking to God or to her mother? To her mother. God hadn’t listened, before.

“Listen to me, Patricia,” Ruth Blum told her daughter, sternly. Like Patty did not call her ‘momma’, her mother in turn never called her Patricia. Things changed and warped and became different in this crisis that she never thought would happen to her.

Ruth’s hand found her face. “I *said*, listen,” she snapped, pulling at Patty to direct her gaze. Patty didn’t think that looking was the same as listening, but she knew what would make her mother happy and she desperately needed to make *someone* happy. She met her mother’s eyes. Ruth Blum looked more like a tired old woman now than Patty had ever before thought that she had.

“You are not going to lose that boy,” her mother said. Patty had slipped into her role as her mother’s child, and therefore Stanley was likewise a boy again. “There’s still breath in his lungs. For now, that’s enough.”

But how long can that be enough for? Patty thought. She started to cry, and her mother sighed.

“Oh, my darling. Come here.” Her mother held her until the shoulder of her blouse was wet with Patty’s tears. Patty was thinking, *I chose him! And even now! I still want him, so -- so, please* -- but even in the comfort of her own mind, she wasn’t sure how that thought ended.

III.

After Beverly Marsh ran away from the specter of her father, she

went back to her room in the Derry Town House and she thought she might vomit again, like she had at the *Jade*, but maybe there was nothing but bile left in her stomach because when she knelt on the floor of her rented bathroom, nothing came up her throat.

She washed her hands in the dingy sink and she kept waiting for the blood to climb up through the drains, but that did not happen either. She thought of Tom's blood and her own bruises and a clown holding a balloon.

She left the bathroom and she sat down on her bed. She couldn't run away from Derry because there was nowhere for her to run *to* -- she laughed, out loud, when she realized that she was now homeless. If she visited a friend, that friend would be in danger from Tom, just like she was in danger now from the thing under Derry. This, too, made her laugh, although it was not funny.

She slid her wedding band off her finger and looked at it, not with distaste or regret, but with a simple and clean *lack* of emotions.

"I hated my father," she said to the ring. "I hate you, Tom." And then she stood up off the bed and left her room.

*

Ben was buttoning up a new shirt when someone knocked on his door. He jumped, and his fingers turned clumsier than they had in a long time. He felt almost drunk, or maybe hungover -- his head felt heavy. *Thick with fear,* he thought.

He opened the door without even looking through the peephole, he did not care who or what was on the other side.

It was Beverly. Seeing her snapped him mostly out of his malaise in a heart-beat; his words stumbled over his tongue and he was sure that he looked like an idiot, just staring at her.

"Hi," she said. To his shock, he saw that she was slightly blushing --

the tips of her ears had turned a bright red, and her cheeks were flushed. “I’m sorry to impose, but I…I needed to talk to someone. Do you…do you want to come back to my room with me? I don’t want to be alone right now. And there’s something there I want to show you.”

Some reflexive fear spiked in Ben’s blood. “Something…do we need to call the others? Call Mike?”

She laughed. “No, I…I think most of them are still out in town, anyway. But it’s not that, Ben. Just come back, will you?”

“Okay,” he said, because what else was he ever going to say to her?

Beverly’s room looked much like his own; he thought the wallpaper was slightly different, but all the rooms in the house shared a basic structural similarity that Ben found somewhat reassuring. Beverly closed the door behind them, and for a moment, both of them just stood there, watching the floor rather than each other’s faces, and both presumably waiting for the other to speak.

Anyone who had known the two of them when they were eleven years old could’ve put money on the bet that Beverly would speak first -- nearly thirty years later, and they would’ve won that bet.

Beverly looked over at him -- just a brief glance, her gaze flicking away after barely a breath’s time -- and sighed. “I want a damn smoke,” she said, and laughed at herself. “But I know I shouldn’t. At least, not inside. Derry has grown; this is a *nice establishment* now.”

For some reason, her reluctance struck Ben as pretty funny, and it cut through some of the impossible tension between them like a knife. He crossed to the window of her room to see if it open; it did. There was no screen, and he waved his arm out of the window to show her.

“Honestly,” he said, smiling at her. “It’s Derry. If this is anything like when we were kids, no one will notice a damn thing.”

“I don’t know,” Beverly said. “I mean, it’s *not* like when we were

kids." But she joined him at the window and produced her cigarette pack from her pocket.

"Is it really so different?" They were slotting back so easily into their old roles, despite -- or even because of -- the terrible presence of the monster under the town.

Beverly hummed a little around the cigarette perched between her lips. She lit it and took a drag; then she plucked it between two long fingers and looked up at him, smiling.

"I'd say so," she said. "I mean, if we were kids, you'd be keeling over from the embarrassment of just being in the same room as me."

She smiled at him as she said it, a private, genuine smile; she was not being cruel -- but it still swept the air right out of his lungs. His face couldn't decide if it should blush or not, and compromised by going pale.

"Ben?" she said, when he didn't reply. The tip of her cigarette burned yellow-red; he looked at it. "I'm sorry...I was just teasing."

"I know," he said. For a long moment, that was *all* he could say. Then, "Honestly, you're right." He smiled at her -- she could surely tell that it was a forced smile, but it was the best he could do.

"It's just," Ben said, and then he paused. If he told her this, it would tell her everything. "I went to the library," he said, probably seemingly out of nowhere. "On my walking-tour of Derry, I mean."

Beverly nodded at him to continue. His reassurances had at least worked well enough that her cigarette was once again tucked between her teeth. Ben watch the tip flare, and breathed in-and-out.

"After that, I came back here," Ben said. "And I guess I was, well, thinking of you."

"Flattering," she said, one eyebrow cocked, blowing smoke out in a steady stream out the open window. The evening air was cool, approaching cold.

He smiled at that, but couldn't stop his story for fear of derailing it

entirely.

“And I -- saw something,” he said. “I mean...I saw Pennywise. But It disguised itself as you.”

That made Beverly stop and turn to meet his eyes. “What?” Her voice was high, flute-like -- scared.

“He pretended to be you and then you were cruel to me. I mean, I realized it wasn’t you, but…” Ben was no longer sure why he was telling her this; it simply felt like something she should know, something he was obligated to share. “It *knows* us...and it tried to use you against me.”

Beverly’s mouth parted open ever-so-slightly. “I don’t want to be a weapon,” she said, frowning. “I… that doesn’t seem right. We shouldn’t hurt each other.”

“You’re not hurting me,” Ben said, trying to express the earnestness of it in his voice. “It’s not...it’s my fault. When we were kids…”

“Don’t feel bad for a crush,” she said, cutting him off. “I mean, please. For me there was…” she trailed off. For her there was Bill, of course. She looked back up at him.

“I’m sure you knew how I felt about Bill,” she said. She was trusting him not to be offended or hurt by it, and he was glad to show that he was neither.

“I think we all knew,” he said, smiling at her.

“I’d hope so,” she said, dryly. “And I mean, half of you guys worshiped the ground he walked on, so I wasn’t even really alone.”

Ben laughed. “That’s just Bill. He has a presence...back at the *Jade* we were all sort of waiting for him to walk in the room, you know?”

Beverly made an ‘eh’ motion with her hand that Bill probably would’ve found rude had he been there to see it. “I guess. But, Ben…” she paused again, her attention returning briefly to her cigarette.

“I knew,” she said softly, once she had exhaled. “That you liked me, I

mean. Well. It was obvious, I suppose. But what I never said was that it was kind of...nice." She peered at him, curiously. "You never pressured me to actually have an interest in you, which I have since learned is...unusual." Her mouth cocked up a little in a smile, half-hurt and half-amused.

"I was so young. We were all so young! I liked that you liked me." She met his eyes; God she was always so bold, it was terrifying -- "I made me feel pretty. Hell, it made me feel powerful. And it was...normal. Gentle. Fuck. I don't know what I'm saying!" She laughed; there was red high on her cheeks.

"It's really good to hear that, Beverly," Ben said. He wasn't sure how to reassure her. "That's all I...I didn't want your attention or anything. I just wanted…" he felt his face heat up. "But I guess I feel weird that I still…"

The cigarette tip was glowing orange-red again. "Are you attracted to me, Ben?"

He jumped at that, and his gaze dropped away from her eyes and down towards the rest of her face. She was, in fact, startlingly good-looking; in a way that surely anyone could appreciate -- the slender impressive curve of her cheek to her chin, her pink lips.

"Yes?" he said.

"Is that a question?"

"No."

"I don't know why I asked that," she said, "to be honest. I also...uh. You're a handsome man, Ben."

He didn't know what to say to that, so he said nothing.

"I don't know what I want," Beverly said. Her voice had softened, she was almost talking just to herself now. "When I started to remember you guys, I wondered…" She shrugged. "I wondered if it'd change anything."

Suddenly, she sighed. "Hold this," she said, and Ben obediently took

the stub of her cig so that she could cross back to her bed. She slipped something small into one hand and walked back. He realized while watching her that she looked tired and pale underneath the striking beauty.

She took her cigarette back, and opened her palm to reveal a delicate gold band. “My wedding ring,” she said needlessly, smiling sadly at it. “This is what I wanted to show you. I went to my father’s house, when you were at the library. He hasn’t lived there for quite a while, because he’s dead.” She paused, as if expecting interruption, but Ben stayed quiet.

“And then there was...I don’t know, the same terrifying mess that always comes with It, I guess. A witch...a candy house...but for me what was the most terrifying was the same as it was when I was eleven years old. When I got back here, I took off my ring right away.”

“Do you remember,” she said, frowning a little and fixing him with another sharp look. She was trying to *see* him, Ben realized, see down to the core of him and discover who he was. He shivered with it. “Do you remember...right before everything, I came running down into the Barrens -- you were in the clubhouse, just you and Richie’s radio.”

“I remember,” Ben said, because suddenly he did. He couldn’t quite recall what came directly after, but he could see Beverly in his mind’s eye, coated in dirt and muck and sweat, eyes wide in fear and panic. He had never before seen her like that.

“I was running from Bowers and his gang,” she said, still watching him. “But what I didn’t tell you -- because I was far too embarrassed to do so -- was that before I was running from Bowers, I was running from my father. There was something *wrong* with him. He had hurt me, but then, he had hurt me a…he had hurt me *a lot*. But it was like every horrible thing he’d ever done was amplified, blown up on to a huge billboard above our heads...he chased me. I was terrified of him. I *hated* him. And I ran like a fucking wildcat.”

Her cigarette was just a tiny thing nestled between her fingertips, now. She bit her lip and then stubbed out the cigarette onto her own

left palm, her eyes widening a little in pain as she did so. Ben reached towards her uselessly; she was too quick to be stopped.

Beverly raised her palm towards him and showed him the small red burn. “But if I hated my father,” she said, “Why did I marry a man just like him?”

“I --” Ben said.

“You don’t know,” Beverly finished for him. “No one has an answer for me. It’s very inconvenient.” She smiled down at the floorspace between them.

“I’m sorry,” he said, unsure of what he was apologizing for. (He was sorry, very sorry indeed, that she slammed the burning end of the cigarette into her own flesh but wasn’t it the same as that time he’d been belligerent and drunk and torn open a beer bottle with his hands, the bottle top cutting into his flesh and dripping blood down onto the floor?)

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” she said. “Or, maybe I do. I don’t know anymore. But I do want…” she paused.

“I feel horrible saying this,” she said. “Because of Stan.”

There was a beat of silence between them. She kept looking down at the floor.

“Say it anyway,” Ben said. “Stan’s with us.” Although he wasn’t sure that he was.

“But he didn’t want to be, though,” Beverly said. She sighed again. This whole conversation had been evidently so difficult for her, but Ben had no words of wisdom to soothe or help.

“It’s just that,” she said. “To everyone else -- this is returning home to the worst thing that ever happened to them. And of course...it’s that for me, too. But I didn’t grow up to lead a happy life, Ben. I mean, I’ve been pretending too. Pretty Mrs. Rogan with her wedding ring and her fancy blouses. But maybe I’m still Ms. Marsh with her cheap, self-embroidered shirts and I’m tired of Tom and I’m tired of being hurt. This is my second chance at happiness and I feel fucking terrible

because only six of us are here."

She said it so forcefully that he had to look at her. He would've perhaps expected tears in her eyes, but they were dry.

"You deserve to be happy," Ben said, voice sure with his certain belief that this was true. "Beverly --"

"I hear you," she said. "But I can't quite believe it. Isn't that terrible?" Ben nodded, because it was.

Beverly sighed once again, this time heavily. "I don't mean to cage you here," she said. "Let's sit down." She perched herself on the bed and Ben stood stolid as a statue until she patted aggressively at the blanket beside her, and then he made his body (*his adult body his thin body so it was okay but also maybe it wasn't -- that was a fucked-up train of thought and he knew that he really did and yet* --) sit down next to her.

"Tell me what It showed you," Beverly said. "Please. I want to know." So he did; he shared the horror of being tricked and touched and terrified.

IV.

Ben and Beverly walked into the Derry Public Library together. Mike had not been particularly expecting that to happen, but he liked it; it made him smile. He ushered them back into the little staff lounge, and pulled each of them into a brief, tight hug. That made Beverly laugh a little, and when she pulled back, she pecked him on the cheek.

"We brought drinks," she said, raising the bag in her hand. "Where's everyone?"

"They're coming," Mike said; her smile was contagious and he grinned back at her. "You seem...in a lighter mood than I would've expected," he said, light enough that she could brush off the question

if it was too much.

“Well,” Beverly said, breezily, “I suppose we both saw some terrible things, but talking about it helps, doesn’t it?” She looked over at Ben, who was watching her with a confused smile that matched how Mike was feeling.

“Oh, Hell,” Beverly said, setting her bags on the table and lifting a bottle of vodka from one. “Maybe I’ve just finally cracked, Mike, but -- if this is the calm before the storm, I’m gonna enjoy it while I can.”

“Very wise, Bev,” Mike said, laughing. He took the whiskey that Ben was proffering and set it beside the vodka. “I wouldn’t be shocked it everyone has the same idea. We’ll set up a little bar and have ourselves a party.”

“Eat, drink, and let’s be merry, for tomorrow we may die?”

They all spun around; Richie Tozier was ducking into the room with a grin on his face and a six pack in his hand.

“A little more morbid than I would’ve put it, Rich,” Mike said, but he took the beer from Richie and pulled him into a one-armed hug, all the same.

“Aw, Mikey, just trying to keep the tone neutral,” Richie laughed. “Anyway, make room on that table, because Big Bill is behind me with Eddie, and I think they both had the same idea. Bunch of alcoholics we turned out to be, eh?”

“It’s a tuh-toast,” sure enough, Bill emerged behind him, Eddie at his side. “To our suh-success.”

“Bit more than a toast, I’d say,” Richie said. “But hey, no complaints from me. Hiya, Eds -- uh, Eddie.”

If Eddie noticed his slip, he didn’t acknowledge it, he just gave a soft “Hello,” with a frown.

Richie peered at him, a concerned crinkle between his eyebrows, and Mike couldn’t pretend he didn’t share his concern. Maybe Eddie had been a quiet child, but he had his sticking points, and an Eddie that

didn't fight back in their childish arguments was concerning, particularly so given how Eddie had snapped at Richie at the *Jade*. Still -- Mike felt fundamentally lost talking to all of his friends' adult selves -- he hadn't learned them yet, hadn't earned their trust. He could watch Eddie, but that was all.

"Let's all pour ourselves a drink and getting started on that toast, huh?" He said, keeping his voice as easy as he could manage. "What'd you bring, Eddie?"

Eddie's eyes flicked away from wherever they'd been wandering and lighted onto Mike's. "Gin," he said, "And, uh, prune juice."

There was a moment of surprised silence, and then Beverly said, "Christ, really?" and Richie burst into laughter beside her.

"I'll have you *know*," Eddie said, "that gin and prune juice is actually quite healthy." And at that, Eddie broke and was smiling, laughing, too. It was gorgeous to see, like the sun appearing from behind stubborn clouds.

"Oh, Eddie," Beverly said, and Mike thought she spoke for all of them when she said, "I do love you."

And they did indeed. Richie was leaning physically half-across the table, though he seemed unaware of it; his smile matched with Eddie's and his eyes followed the other man everywhere. They'd always been close; Mike smiled to see that it hadn't changed much, even after Richie annoyed Eddie earlier in the day. There was still some level of tentativeness to their relationship, but surely that was true of all of them. They had *all* both changed and not-changed -- they were themselves, but they were no longer eleven years old. That the love they once had still remained was a miracle.

The Losers Club did, in fact, have a toast. They tried to make Bill do it, but he just smiled and said, "N-not tonight, uh-unless y-you want it to t-take a s-solid thuh-thirty m-minutes or s-so."

“Have mercy on the poor man,” Richie grinned from beside him. “You do it, Mikey!”

Mike laughed. “Hey now, *you’re* the man on the radio.”

Richie waved a dismissive hand. “Eh, I just do Voices. I’m not so good at being myself.”

“Maybe you should work on that,” Beverly said from beside him. She draped herself onto his arm, but as had always been the case with Richie-and-Bev, there was a playfulness and childishness to the flirtation that marked it as platonic. Mike snuck a glance at Ben, and he was watching them both with a small fond smile.

“Aw, Bevvie,” Richie crooned, leaning in as if for a kiss -- Beverly puckered up, but they both pulled away at the last second, laughing. “What if you don’t *like* the real me?”

“Unhealthy way of thinking,” Beverly said sternly. “See a therapist, Mr. Tozier.”

“Very cold, Ms. Marsh!” No one seemed much surprised when Beverly did not correct him. In fact, she instead leaned over and planted a kiss on Richie’s cheek.

“Well then,” Richie said, and Mike was amused to note that he was blushing a little. “I guess you’re forgiven.”

Mike felt warm down to his core. By God he’d missed this! He had friends in Derry, of course he did, but not -- not quite like this. Nothing could even be quite like this.

Clearing his throat, he raised his glass in the air. The first one to spot him was Eddie, who raised his glass, too, and offered a tiny sweet grin on his tired face. Mike found himself deeply charmed, and nodded at him, smiling back. “Hey,” he said. “To the Losers, huh? To friendship and to love and to surviving this Goddamn town.”

“By the skin of our fucking teeth!” Richie cheered, clinking his beer against Mike’s glass.

“I wish we could all be here,” Ben said, at the same time as Beverly

said, “If only Stan was with us.”

“I thuh-think w-we ah-all w-want that,” Bill said. Beverly smiled at Ben, and took his hand. Mike looked at their fingers curled tight around each other and thought, *I don’t want anything to ever break that grip. Not between any of us.*

Across the table, Eddie said quietly, “To Stan.”

“To Stan the Man,” Richie said, leaning slightly across the table to gently touch bottle to glass with Eddie. “He was kind of always the best of us, so I hope he’s sending us strength.”

“To the Losers,” Mike said. “To us.” And at that, they all drank, long and deep.

Drinks were poured and cheeks were reddened and conversation was perhaps lighter than it should be -- in short, Mike could not think of a better way to spend The Night Before. They had talked about murders and missing children for as long as any unprepared civilian could; they were in the end no better or worse than anyone else. There was perhaps a desperation to their joy, but it was joy all the same.

“I’m gonna go grab myself another beer,” Mike said, standing. “I have a stash in the staff fridge. Anyone want one?”

“My six-pack has magically disappeared, thanks to the help of my beloved friends,” Richie said. “So yeah, I’ll have one.”

“M-me t-too, Muh-Mikey,” Bill said, smiling softly at him. Mike nodded shortly at the two of them and made his way back, humming slightly as he went.

It was not cold in the back room, but he shivered upon entering it.

In retrospect, he should’ve known that ‘joy’ was too pleasant a note

for their evening to end on.

The balloons came first. An impossible number of them, billowing out at him in blue and orange. The were emblazoned with MISSING SOMEONE? and the orange read TURN BACK NOW. The bold lettering mocked him.

It took Mike a minute to find his voice over the ferocious patter of his heart.

“Guys,” he said when he was finally able to, “I think you should come back here.” He did not shout it, because he did not need to.

“W-wuh-what i-is --” Bill started, but he gave up on the attempted question as soon as he had entered the room. Mike watched his face go pale, and wondered if he himself looked that scared. He suspected that he did.

“Jesus Christ,” Richie said, right behind Bill.

“He’s here,” Beverly said, and Mike thought Ben was speaking for all of them when he said, “In the library? *Now?* ” like that was an absurd impossible thing. He felt a surge of terrified anger; this was *his* space, dammit!

Quietly, from the very back of the group, Eddie said, “The fridge is bleeding.”

They all turned to stare at it, and it was.

“No,” Beverly said, “*No no no* --”

Someone had to open it, but Mike was frozen still as a statue. For a long moment they all were, and then Mike heard Bill say *Fuck* softly under his breath, and it was Bill who strode across the floor and yanked the door of the staff refrigerator open.

In the fridge was Stanley Uris’ head. No one screamed, but Mike heard a desperate hitching breath behind him that could’ve been

Eddie but also could've been any of them.

And then it got worse, because Stan's limbs were all in there with him and they unfolded around him like a parlor trick, except that it was flesh and blood and it was frankly horrible; Stan's arms and legs pinwheeled around him until the figure of an adult Stanley Uris was standing before them, as lively as anything.

He was true-to-life and perhaps that made it worse. Stan had not grown to be tall -- he was 5'7" on the outside -- but he was settled; adult. He was a youthful man with a pretty, expressive face -- specked still with acne scars along his jaw -- and a smile that was frankly contagious, or that would've been, in better circumstances. He approached them; his walk was sure, his stride broad and confident. He raised his spectacles up to rest in his hair, and smiled at them.

"Hello, all!" he said. Mike was the only one to have heard his adult voice, of course, but he didn't need to tell the Losers that the voice they were hearing was as real as everything else. Everyone was watching Stan with a quiet, expectant horror.

"I see you started without me. That's sort of rude, isn't it?" He frowned, exaggeratedly. "Couldn't you have waited? I was almost here -- I was almost dead! I just had to wait for a nurse to come into my room with a tool I could borrow...just had to finish the job."

The figure that was not Stanley Uris grinned again, and held up his arms. His shirt sleeves had been rolled up to the elbow, letting them all see the horrible cuts running up and down both of his forearms. One was still bleeding, and Mike watched with a hazy, numb feeling as a drop of sticky blood fell to the floor, staining the carpet where it landed.

"*No*," he heard Richie say behind him, but it was really more of a moan than a statement. "*No* -- he's not -- he is not dead he's in *Atlanta* --" he took a staggering step forward, towards Stan; beside him, Beverly gasped and grabbed at his arm to stop him.

"It's not real," Mike said. His voice sounded pretty calm, he thought. He was not calm. "It's just another trick, Rich, you know he's full of

them." If Stan Uris was really dead, there was no way in Hell Mike was gonna be able to get Richie down into the sewers and then where would they be? So he could not be dead. It had to be a lie.

"Oh, I'm real!" the thing that was not Stan said, with a terrible grin. "You're a coward, Rich, so you don't want to see me, but -- I'm real!"

Richie apparently had no wise-cracks for that -- all of them watched him stumble backwards blindly and Mike felt panic start to coil in his chest. *Oh no, oh fuck, how do we pick ourselves up from here?*

"You're a hopeless romantic so you're probably thinking of my wife, Rich, but that's the saddest part of all -- I'm a suicide so she won't even be able to mourn me properly! Whattaya think of that, Rich? Will you be able to mourn *your* soulmate's death?"

Mike was looking at Richie so he saw how bad his hands were shaking. This scene was making it obvious what all of them had already known -- that Richie was just a man with weaknesses like any other. In his mind, Mike begged him to be strong, but how could ask for more than what was possible?

"And you, Eddie -- speaking of romance, how's the wife? How's your sex life -- that's part of marriage, right? That's part of love? For you, we all know it is -- but do you love her? Me and Patty had a great relationship, you know." The thing that was not Stan smiled, and tucked a long curl of dark hair behind his ear. "We touched each other and were touched in turn. Who was the last person to touch you like that, Eddie? Are they sick, too?"

"Or maybe *she* makes you sick. Bill makes his wife sick, doesn't he, Billy-boy? Sick with nerves." Stan was leaning towards Bill, but Bill did not appear to be threatened, he stood his ground, even with Eddie's horrified face beside him. "You love her, but you don't know *how* to love her -- that makes sense, because you never learned how to love. Juh-juh-Georgie *died* and he was the only one you ever truly loved! How about that, Big Bill! How about *that* ?" Stan threw back his head and laughed; it was horrible to see.

"It all comes down to that, doesn't it, Losers? Love, love, and love, and soulmates -- you all believe in those, don't you? Whether you like

it or not? Your soulmate dies and you want to dress in rags. I know how it is; I understand. If Patty ever died, I'd kill myself! Ha-ha! Isn't that *funny* ?"

He turned towards each of the others in rapid succession. "Ben, you'll never be loved, not how you want -- you know that, which is why you never bother trying. Is hard living such a lonely life? It must be. This is the most fun you've had in years!"

Mike watched as Ben, who'd been standing pressed up close to Beverly and Richie, seemed to drift away from the group -- he wanted to stop him, stop all of them from separating, but it seemed he still could not make himself move.

"Beverly, you'll always be loved -- but it won't be how you wanted it. Unless you *like* getting hurt? It certainly seems to happen often enough! Your dear old dad would really like your taste in men, right? Whattaya say, Beverly? Was daddy your soulmate, after all?" Mike didn't even have to look at Beverly to know her reaction; beside him, she was shaking.

And then Stan swung his face -- that lovely familiar face, twisted and *wrong* -- towards him. "Pathetic! But not so pathetic as you, Mikey -- you never even left Derry to see what greener pastures held! Did you enjoy playing the gentle public servant while all your friends grew up and got rich?"

Stanley took a staggering step towards them, one that even their terrified minds could not ignore; the Losers Club as a whole backed up suddenly and sharply.

"I'll tell you a secret, Mikey," Stan said. "'Michael -- meaning: *Who is like God? '* (The answer being, *No one, you're all alone* --) I'll tell you a special secret. There's no one waiting for you; no soulmate at the end of the rainbow. You fight me, and you die alone. That's that. End of the fucking story, and it's as unpleasant as one of Bill's books!"

For a moment -- a long moment, a far-too-long moment, Mike was silent. Then, "No, it isn't," he said.

Stanley smiled at him, and then the smile split the flesh of his face

and kept going, blood dripping over the delicate chin, the scars on his jaw, staining the starched collar of his neat shirt. Beside him, Mike heard Beverly mutter *Fuck!* underneath her breath, and that seemed to be the best any of them could manage.

"YES IT IS!" It screamed out of Stan Uris' throat. "YES IT IS! DON'T LIE TO YOURSELF, MIKEY! DON'T LIE TO YOUR FRIENDS!"

Around him, the balloons still floating in the air began to *pop!*, each one as loud as a gunshot, until there was only a single red one left, emblazoned with the slogan, I ♥ DERRY, which the monster was holding in its hand. "I'll leave this one here with you, Losers," he said, smiling -- a normal smile this time, but made horrifying by the still-split flesh and cascade of blood down his front. "As a reminder of where you'll die!" And with that, Stan was gone.

The balloon floated up to the ceiling; they all watched it go, wordlessly. They all stood there, waiting for someone to move or to say something, but it was not words that broke their silence, but a sharp whistling breath.

"Oh, Eddie --" that was Beverly, and of course she was right, Mike turned to see Eddie with one hand tight on his collar, as he gasped and wheezed for breath. They had seen that he still had an aspirator, of course, but it was another thing entirely to see him still in such a desperate need for it. All of them moved towards Eddie, even Richie who looked so shaken that he barely seemed to be breathing, himself.

"Get him some water!" That was Ben, handy, helpful Ben, and he was already moving to do so, but Eddie managed to loosen the tight-clenched hand, and waved it at him.

"No," gasped Eddie, "No, I'm alright." He produced the same aspirator they'd seen at the *Jade* and took a breath from it, and they all watched in nervous silence until he settled, half-waiting for a joke from Richie that they knew wouldn't come. (In fact, if anyone had been looking Richie's way at that exact moment, they would've seen him trying to catch his breath with a wild terror in his eyes. But Mike was focused on Eddie, as were they all.)

"It's just," Eddie said, when he could finally manage it, and his timid

eyes were darting around beneath his spectacles. “How are we -- how are we supposed to beat *that* -- if just seeing Stanley is enough -- enough to...make us all fall apart --” he glanced at Richie, who was standing shakily apart from them, clearly unnerved, and Mike privately agreed: it was always scary when the Trashmouth was finally silenced.

Then, no small measure of anger flashed in Eddie’s eyes. “What the Hell do we *do?* Huh?” his eyes wandered the room again, searching; they found Bill and stayed there. Mike realized that most of them were looking at Bill; even Richie, who had his glasses perched on top of his head and was rubbing at his eyes, was turned towards him.

Come on, Big Bill, Mike thought. *Prove to me that you can still do it, that you’re still the man I remember -- God I hope you are -- you opened the fridge now tell us how to fucking fight it --*

Bill looked at them. It was a mild look; he did not seem to be at all surprised that all eyes were on him.

“I-it *duh-does* know us,” he said, in his slow adult voice. “*I-it* does, I muh-mean, the cuh-clown. But i-it’s s-scared of uh-us, right?”

“What’s it got to be scared *of* ?” Eddie said. He looked like he was desperate to believe what Bill was saying.

“The Lucky Seven,” Mike said, quietly, and Bill nodded at him.

“E-exactly. We’re a-all...we’re *all* still ah-alive...including St-stuh --” it seemed for a long and terrifying moment that he was not going to be able to get through the name, but Bill merely paused, and frowned. “*Stanley* ,” he said after a moment, with a quiet emphasis. “Stuh-Stanley too. He’s oh-oh...he’s alright. We’ll cuh-call his w-wife and see huh-how he’s doing. I-I h-have to c-call my wuh-wife too s-so…”

“Yeah,” Mike said, finally forcing himself to speak around the dryness in his throat. “I’ve already talked with Patty not that long ago -- she has my number, so she would call if anything happened.” Bill was nodding at him, reassuringly.

“Let’s call it a night, huh?” Mike said, looking at all their pale faces

and knowing he almost certainly didn't look any better. "We should all try and get some rest, anyway. I have some stuff I wanna finish up here, but then I'll had home and make that call."

"I-I'd luh-like to b-be th-there for the c-call," Bill said, quietly. "I-if thuh-that's a-alright?"

"Of course," Mike said, and suddenly felt deeply grateful that he wouldn't have to make another terrible phone call alone. "Of course, Big Bill." He looked across at Bill for a moment, and then finally he laughed a little, digging around in his pocket for something. He produced a key on a small ring, shiny and unused.

"A spare key to my place," he said quietly. "Here." He tossed it lightly to Bill, who caught it easily.

"Buh-bet y-you were wuh-wuh-wond-d --"

"Wondering why I got it made? Yeah, I was. Look, you can head to my place, now, alright? I'll meet up with you real soon. And take a cab instead of walking, Bill, okay? I don't think any of us should be alone on the streets of Derry right now."

"Yeah," Rich said from where he was still standing off to the side, faced away from all of them. "There's someone out there killing *kids*. Who knows what might happen?" At that, he slung his sport-coat over one shoulder and began walking briskly towards the door.

"Richie!" Beverly jogged after him, her hair bouncing over her shoulders. "C'mon, we'll all grab a cab together…"

"No thanks," Richie said, not turning around. "We all made it big, remember? I can pay my own way."

"It's not safe --" that one was Ben, who was trailing after Beverly.

"Nothing's fucking *safe* in this town! Adrian Mellon wasn't a kid *or* alone when he got murdered! So get off my goddamn back."

"Oh, get over yourself, Rich." Mike found himself turning, blinkingly, towards Eddie's unexpected words. Eddie was still clutching his aspirator in one hand -- so tightly that his knuckles were white

around it -- but his drawn, bloodless face was pinched tight in plain annoyance; there was nothing delicate about the sharpness of the look he was giving Richie; Sonia Kaspbrak would not have approved.

"*Excuse me*?" Richie looked spitting mad.

"You think you can pretend you're not scared if you storm off now? We all fucking saw you, Rich We *all* got scared by Stan!" Eddie came forward so that he was standing abreast with Beverly and Ben, but if Mike had to guess he thought that Richie was looking at Eddie and only Eddie.

Richie's mouth worked noiselessly for a moment. "What do you people want from me? Do I have to bear my fucking heart? Is that what you want, Eds? Christ!" Richie grabbed at his own hair as he said it, and Mike watched him yank at it, hard, hard enough surely to hurt. He winced in sympathy. The scene was getting away from him, and he was suddenly terrified that it was all going to fall apart, right there and then.

"Richie," Beverly said. "*Please* just take the cab with us."

"Fine," Richie said, "fine!" Mike thought maybe they all noticed it at the same time -- that at some point in the conversation, Richie had started crying. Mike looked around at the others; Beverly had tears in her eyes, too.

"I think we'll all just a little right on edge right now," Mike said, and waited for them all to look at him. "You four go get some sleep. Bill and I will try and contact Stan, and in the morning, we'll tackle what comes next."

Eddie nodded sharply at his words, the determined set of his eyebrows not relenting. Richie looked at Eddie, and then at Beverly and Ben (Ben was cupping her elbow with one hand, Mike couldn't help but notice), and then finally at himself and Bill.

"Alright," Richie said. "Goodnight, Mike, Bill. Say 'Hi' to Mrs. Uris for me."

"For all of us," Beverly said. She smiled at Mike, a tired smile but a

genuine one, despite the fact that he could still see that her eyes were wet.

“I-I wuh-will,” Bill said, and it was like something relaxed, almost imperceptibly, with Bill’s words; they all moved at once to the library’s exit, and there was a chorus of soft good-nights as the went their ways.

“See you at home, Bill,” Mike said; Bill was the last of them to leave, as he was going separately. Bill spun his recently granted key chain around one finger, and smiled.

“Duh-don’t s-stay up too lu-late, wuh-working,” Bill said, his voice soft and reassuring even through the still-worsening stutter.

“I won’t,” Mike said. He was suddenly glad, very glad, not only that Bill had come when he called -- he had never really doubted that he would -- but that he had come as the man who Mike had hoped he would be, brave and stalwart, still.

“Good-night,” he said to Bill, and the two men nodded quietly at each other in acknowledgement, and then Bill slipped out the door and into the cool evening air.

Mike turned back his papers, a shiver still dancing its way up and down his spine. They had weathered another appearance by It, but they all knew that it was very nearly time for the real thing; the final desperate fight. He just had to hope that they could be somewhere close to ready for it, when it came.

Notes for the Chapter:

> The information that Eddie thinks about 'Patient Zero' and HIV transmission is very incorrect -- it is, to my knowledge, what the prevailing narrative would've been at the time, which is why it's included, but for the record, I want to be clear that that is a false narrative that developed in part due to societal homophobia. You can read a brief overview here on Dugas' wikipedia page.

7. Rising Waters

Summary for the Chapter:

> Stan and Patty have a talk. As the crisis builds, so do relationships within the Losers.

Notes for the Chapter:

> This chapter took much longer to post than I intended! I actually ended up splitting the original draft in two, so the next chapter is mostly already written and should take way less turn-around time. TBH I thought this whole fic would be a lot shorter so like, I am just trying my best at this point, lol.

// Atlanta, Georgia

Patty Uris did not like seeing her husband like this.

He was getting better. There was that, at least. Physically, he was no longer in any danger; or -- that's what the doctors told her. The gauze on his arm still hurt to look at -- and it physically hurt, too, which made her feel horrible and sick. The nurses were good at monitoring his pain, though, even if they gave her awful-pity looks as they did it.

But now that he was stable physically there were sickening conversations about his *mental state*, something neither she nor anyone in their combined family seemed ready or able to have.

Had he attempted before? No, he hadn't. Had he ever mentioned suicide to her? No, he hadn't. Had he ever hurt himself? She had been crying, silently, by the time they got to that question -- but no, he hadn't -- at least not since she'd met him. *We're soulmates; I would know.*

Even though he was getting better, they didn't want him to leave, because they thought -- horribly -- they thought he might *try again.* It made her feel ill to think about. His parents were coming down to visit, and she did not want to see them and tell them this. Stanley was barely speaking to her (or to anyone --) but she thought he also

did not want to see them.

“Tomorrow, your parents will probably be coming,” she said to her husband in the same steady and factual way she’d been trying to impart all information to him in these past several terrible days.

“Oh,” Stanley said, in that same terrible-emotionless way he’d answered everything she’d told him, Since. She knew that he did not want to see them, but even that was barely expressed.

“I’m going to get you dinner,” she said, because she still loved him, despite everything. They would feed him, regardless -- but only she could pick out something he might like.

Hospital food was not very good. Patty would not have recommended it as the ideal avenue to spoil your husband. She made do with what she could, and she chose the most appetizing things she could find. She brought his food to him on a tray, and set the tray in his lap.

“Thank you,” Stanley said, and then he looked at the tray for a long moment. He just kept looking at it and then, suddenly, he took a gasping breath, and as she watched, he started to cry.

She recoiled instantly; he had not yet cried at all, since he had first hurt himself.

“Stanley!” She said. “Stanley? Are you in pain?”

“No,” he said, “God no, I’m not -- Patty you would know, I’ve done this to you -- *fuck!* ” He didn’t use language like that, at least not around her -- she was going to start crying too, any second now, *No please no don’t do this*, whatever this is --

Stan scrubbed his hand down his face. But even as he wiped at his

tears, more trickled down his face; it was as if, now that he had started crying, he could not stop. How many tears did he have, inside? How much was there all locked away?

“Stanley,” she said again, helplessly. She had no idea what to do; it was all so terrifying and unfamiliar (except for how sometimes -- *she had seen* -- but she had ignored those things too -- *oh no oh no please)*, and it was uncomfortable, because she was his wife but she didn’t know how to fix this.

“I feel like I have to tell you,” Stan said, but then halfway through he cut himself off. “No...I *want* to tell you. I can’t justify hurting you, not ever, but I want...there’s something about me that I want to make you understand…”

There is no reasoning that could ever make me understand this, Patty thought, and some hurt-scared thing inside added *Nothing could ever make me forgive you for this* -- and both said *Oh but Stanley I do love you and I don’t want to know something so terrible*.

“You don’t have to,” was all she said aloud.

“I do,” Stanley said. “Patty, I do. I have to tell you. Please, just let me tell you this.”

After a long moment -- too long -- she nodded, and Stan kept talking. She looked not as his miserable face but at everything else; at his hair that was unwashed and tangled; at the folds of the blankets over his legs; at the tray of carefully-selected foods.

“I don’t know if I can explain it to you,” Stanley was saying. “I can barely explain it to myself. But I want -- I think maybe that you need to know. I think maybe I should’ve told you a long time ago, because...because I don’t know. But I want to explain it to you as well as I can.” She looked at his face again; he smiled suddenly, although it was a deeply sad smile. “I don’t think that will be very well at all,” he admitted. “But I have to try.”

“Alright,” she said. She sat back. She had to give him this; suddenly it felt incredibly important to do so. “I’ll listen.”

“Thank you,” her husband said. He took a long moment to compose himself, to find words. She had rarely seen him so hesitant.

“In 1958 -- well, I guess it started in 1957 -- there was a spate of missing and murdered children in Derry, Maine. That is, of course, the town where I was born.”

Never in her life had Patrica Blum Uris heard anything like that about her husband’s life -- she had never even suspected it. She did not know what to say, but she gasped, reflexively.

Stanley’s eyes were on her. “Yes,” he said quietly. “It was quite bad,” he said. “Quite difficult. There was a curfew, and all that...but it didn’t save those kids. The ones that were missing never turned up...or they turned up dead.”

“That’s horrible,” Patty said; she had intended to just listen, but the righteous anger and fear beat that out. “That’s no place to raise a child!”

“If you asked my parents why they didn’t just up and leave…” Stan shrugged. “I don’t know if they’d have an answer for you. Derry isn’t a normal town, Patty; I can’t explain why it isn’t but it’s...wrong, somehow. It’s like it’s cursed.”

Stan sat up, then, and gently took her hands into his. She hated seeing the gauze on his forearm, but she didn’t pull away. She was desperately tired of wanting to look away from her own husband. So she didn’t look away, and he met her eyes for a brief and glorious second, until his gaze dropped and he started speaking again.

“I’m making it sound awful, but it wasn’t, not really. I had friends, a really good group of friends -- “ He laughed, lightly, and that was a sound she’d nearly forgotten -- “other losers, mostly. I was...I was the only Jewish kid, but we were all misfits or picked on in our own way, for our own reasons. And that summer...the summer of 1958…it was the seven of us...and…” Stanley was struggling to speak as she watched; the hand of his uninjured arm had her in a vice-grip while the other lay loose and warm in her palm and she thought of the doctor saying *Nerve damage is likely with an injury of this degree* and she wanted to hide again, or maybe to scream. She did neither.

“There was something else in Derry, something crueler than the big kids who bullied us. The other thing...person, I guess, we never knew his name...if he even has one…if It has one. The murderer.” His words were unraveling like so much string, and she had to watch him getting upset, aching with how much he wanted her to *see* .

She chewed her lip. “Did -- Stanley, are you telling me that -- did someone hurt you, you and you friends -- when you were younger?”

Stanley blinked up at her and *God* there was so much of this scene that she hated; seeing him in the hospital's pale linens instead of the ones she laundered every week.

“Please tell me,” she said, and held her breath. Oh it was a terrible thing to imagine, her husband when he was only eleven years old and there was someone out there who was so evil that Stanley could barely talk about him --

“Yes?” Stanley said, and then seemed almost stunned by his own mouth. “Yes...I...I guess that’s --” he smiled up at her, a brittle and sad smile. “I guess I never really thought about it like that.”

“He hurt you,” she said, and well, maybe she was starting to cry a little bit, but she wasn’t running away so a few tears were probably alright. She was only human, after all. “There was something evil in Derry and it hurt you and you *forgot* but your friend called you and you remembered. And it scared you so much that you --” she could not finish that sentence. Stanley was watching her, quiet and still.

“You and your friends...you all were so young...I’m sorry, Stanley.”

“It’s not *your* fault,” Stanley said. “I couldn’t even remember it for all those years…” He lifted his good hand to her cheek and let solemn fingers cup at her face. “You’re the best thing in my life. And I was going to --”

“It’s okay,” Patty said, gently. It wasn’t really, not yet, and maybe not ever, but -- well. “You’re here.” *Thank you God*. She bit her lip, then tugged at the neck of her blouse -- just enough so that the mark above her left breast was visible. “Still silver.” She had been avoiding looking at her mark every time she changed clothes; but it *was* still a

proud silver, *it was it was*.

Stanley stared at her for a long moment, and then he smiled, again; still brittle, but slightly less sad. “There are so many things that we’re going to have to talk about,” he said, and maybe that -- maybe that was true.

(*They did not lie to each other, they never would, but was it really* honest *to hide their fears and hurts and bottle them up -- and oh Patty was going to have to tell things too, old stories about old injuries and terrors -- and yes that would be hard but she just wanted to talk with him again and --*)

Stanley’s hand crept to the back of her neck, his fingers gentle in her long hair. He pulled her forward and he kissed her; very soft, very sweet; as hesitant as he had been when they had first started dating. She let go of his limp hand so that she could wrap her arms around the back of his head and feels the curls of his hair and maybe one hand drifted to his neck to feel that strong pulse and that was okay. She opened her mouth against her husband’s lips and for the brief span of stolen kisses in a busy hospital, Patty Uris did not want to cry; her mind bloomed pink and orange and yellow; happy, hopeful colors like flowers.

// Derry, Maine

Beverly did not enter the Derry Townhouse alone; three of her closest friends trailed out after her as she exited the cab. “I’m gonna smoke outside for a minute,” she said; sure there was that ashtray in her room but she was thinking of that open window and she was trying to be courteous to future guests. Courteous indeed, that was Beverly Rogan née Marsh. *Right.* Right?

“Got a spare cig?” That was Richie, of course, begging smokes off her like when they were kids.

“Sure,” she said, easily. “Ben -- can I talk to you? In a minute?”

Ben nodded, and she knew, deep in her bones, that however long she took to stand in the cool Maine air and smoke, Ben would be waiting for her at the door to her room when she was done. That sort of loyalty was a little scary, but she'd take it anyway.

Ben and Eddie climbed the stairs, and when she handed Richie his cigarette he was looking at her, curiously. She glanced over at him and pretended not to notice that his eyes were still a little red.

"So," he said. "You and Ben…"

"Me and Ben what?" she said. She sucked harshly on the end of her cigarette, holding the smoke inside her lungs for longer than was strictly necessary. She let out a slow breath, watching the smoke climb away from her. Richie had barely touched his lit cigarette.

"He was pretty into you when we were kids," Richie said, breezily. "Just wondering if that was still a thing, I guess."

"It's not *that* thing," Beverly said, annoyed. "It's a different thing."

"Sure, sure."

"It is!"

"I said sure!"

"You're a liar and an ass, Richie Tozier."

"Why, I *never*, Ms. Marsh…"

Beverly let her cigarette burn for a moment, as she looked up into Richie's eyes. He was tall; when had he gotten that tall? "Do you call me Ms. because you've noticed I took my ring off, or just because you're rude?"

Richie smiled at her; it was sort of a sad smile. "That depends," he said. "Why'd you take your ring off?"

"Because," Beverly said, and then she took a long and slow drag on her cigarette for the simple reason that she could; no one was going to stop her. "Because I hate my husband," she said.

“I knew that, of course,” Richie said. He leaned back against the brick wall of the Townhouse.

“Sure, Rich,” she said. “And the reason you’re unmarried is just because you’re having so much fun being a bachelor.”

“I’m waiting on my soulmate,” Richie said, easily, and Beverly thought, *Shouldn’t I know something about that?* She could almost remember something he had told her once. But when her mind glanced at it, her memory bounced off it, reflected away.

“Yeah,” she said. “Good luck with that.”

“I’m sure I’ll need it,” Richie said. He tilted his head back, letting his hair press against the bricks. “But then, won’t we all?”

Her cigarette had burned down to a stub again. There was still a little red irritation on her palm from the last one she’d smoked; this one she stubbed out and disposed of in the provided ashtray. Richie sighed beside her, abandoning his own half-smoked.

“I actually quit a while back,” he said to her. “Shows ya how flimsy it all is, right?”

“I don’t know, Rich,” she said. She was suddenly very tired, and cupped a hand over her mouth as she yawned. “Extenuating circumstances, and all that.”

“Sure,” Richie said. “And hey, sorry for freaking out earlier. I was just…” he trailed off. “Well. It’s heavy shit, right?”

“It is.” She turned towards him, and before he could bolt she pulled him into a loose, gentle hug. “I was scared, too. Good-night, Rich.”

He did not even pretend to protest at the hug. “Sleep well, Bevvie,” he said, quietly, and then they let go of each other and smiled painful smiles.

Beverly patted at his elbow, and then she climbed the stairs to her room. Ben was waiting for her, just like she knew he would be.

*

Beverly had just missed Eddie, who had passed by Ben on his way up the stairs.

“Waiting for someone?” Eddie said.

“Yes,” Ben said, his voice a near-whisper. “I am.”

If he was going to be honest, there was no use in teasing him. Eddie smiled at Ben. “You two make a handsome couple,” he said.

Ben blushed like a teenager. “We’re not --”

Eddie laughed a little. “I know. But...it’s heading there, isn’t it?”

Ben said nothing for a long moment; then, he smiled. It was a very sweet smile, on his handsome grown-up face. “Well,” he said, “I guess.”

“Good-night, Ben.”

“Good-night, Eddie. You’re sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” Eddie said. “Really. Sleep well.” The two men nodded at each other, and then Eddie turned to climb up the stairs. He didn’t know how to say to Ben that he was fine *because* he never outgrew the asthma attacks or the little cases of advil (he had some pills tucked into his pocket right now; he was probably going to take some when he got up to his room) or the digestive aids or the avoidance of running (or the avoidance of looking at men -- huh.)

He tapped wearily at the hard plastic casing of his aspirator, his mouth set in a hard, dissatisfied line. How was it that good old Haystack had changed so much, was now capable of being around and perhaps even *with* Beverly?

It was as if Ben had managed to retain the best of his childhood self --

that loyal and loving boy -- while growing up enough that now he could actually *talk* to Beverly. And meanwhile when Richie had tried to touch Eddie's cheek Eddie had been about ready to bite his head off. He was terrified of being *Eds* again because being Eds was perhaps the source of all his problems...it was Eds that wanted to do impossible things like running fast or --

Or looking at other boys? Was that Eds' fault, too?

Oh he *really* was getting a headache, now. Eddie pressed at his temple, and continued up the stairs.

*

No one saw Richie on the stairs of the Derry Townhouse, which he thought was great, because the panic that he'd been trying to stave off with one of Beverly's cigarettes was really starting to set in.

No, *not* panicking. Richie was *definitely* not panicking, he was just -- he told himself, unconvincingly -- he was simply reacting. He knew, of course, that soulmates shared each other's pains. He'd known that for a real long time; it was part and parcel of every book about soulmates or song about soulmates or movie about soulmates. It was *essential.*

But still: when Eddie stopped breathing right and harsh pain raced up and down Richie's throat at the same time; he was horrified and shocked. Nothing could have prepared him for it, he couldn't *breathe,* what the *fuck* --

Eventually his mind caught up with what was occurring and convinced him to take a breath; it was only that fact that saved him from wheezing just as obviously as Eddie had.

Fuck, Eds , he had thought, hazily, *If it's always this bad I'm sorry for being a prick about it* -- And then he felt guilty for calling Eddie 'Eds' again, even in the confines of his own mind.

So now he was back in his room and Absolutely Not Panicking because there was nothing to panic over. No one, least of all Eddie, had noticed...but…

I should tell Eddie, he thought. *Hm. No, wait, actually I shouldn't.* Richie gritted his teeth. It had already been such a long goddamn night.

*

The taxi dropped Bill off at Mike's house and Bill thought, once again, of how much of a burden it must actually have been to live in Derry all these years. He did not so much feel guilty as he was somewhat in awe of Mike. Living alone was hard enough; Bill had barely ever done it in his life and he didn't much want to; but here was Mike's place -- built and filled by himself only.

The living room of his place was dark, with heavy shadows. Bill flicked the light on and then he looked at Mike's telephone for a long time before he picked up the receiver. He dialed up the number of the cottage he shared with Audra, although he knew she would be in bed. Perhaps it was cowardly, but he hoped she would not pick up the phone, so that he could just leave a message for her. It seemed cleaner that way; less dangerous. If he had come all this way alone, only to still hurt her -- well! He didn't much like the idea.

He got the answering machine.

He really wished he could fucking talk properly.

"Ah-Audra," he said, and he had never before stuttered over her name, how terrifying was that? "I-it's muh-me, Bill...I-I'm at huh-home in Muh-Maine. I-I'll be back a-as suh-soon as I c-can…I-I huh-hope you're w-well..." there were all sorts of things he wanted, *needed* to say to her, but it was simply unrealistic.

"I'll...I'll b-be as suh-safe as I c-c-can." That was really the only thing

he could promise.

Bill Denbrough set down the receiver. A wave of exhaustion gripped him, and he went and sat down on Mike's couch to rest for a moment. Would Patty Uris be home? Would she answer the phone? He had to wait for Mike to get back; he could barely speak and now his thoughts were swimming, too.

*

When Beverly climbed up the stairs, she looked tired. Ben could understand that; the evening was still young, but it felt like past-midnight to his exhausted bones; the pure adrenaline that had spiked from seeing the imitation of Stan had dropped off and now his muscles ached the way they would after a tough day's labor.

"God, I'm tired," Beverly said. "You too, huh?" She grinned up at him as she opened her door; the grin was only a little forced.

He just smiled softly at her, and let her lead him into her room again.

"What did you want to talk about?" He asked. Beverly flicked on the lamp by the bed, and switched off the overhead. The light filling the room was suddenly soft and warm, softening the lines of her face and making her eyes dark and captivating.

"It's not so much talking. Well, I guess it is, but -- I was thinking. Do you think it would be strange," Beverly said, "If we were to spend the night together?"

Ben's heart picked up in his chest, but he looked her square in the eye. Perhaps he blushed, but he did not look away.

"I don't think that'd be strange at all," he said. "Is that really what you want?"

"I'm not offering to have sex with you," Beverly said. "Just to clarify."

“I didn’t --”

“I know you didn’t.” She smiled. “I know, Ben.” She reached up to his face and placed her hand on his cheek. Her hand was cold, but he did not shiver. “Sometimes you just have to say the unspoken things aloud.”

“That’s hard,” Ben murmured. When he spoke, the positions of her fingertips shifted ever-so-slightly. “That’s really hard, Beverly.”

“Yeah,” she said, and then something that he had once dreamed about happened -- she leaned up and she kissed him. (*He had dreamt about this at age eleven and she was taller than him then. But oh how things were different, except for where they weren’t* --)

Beverly’s lips were warm unlike her hand and it was just a kiss a simple chaste kiss but *oh* her thumb traced under his chin and he could feel the slightest press of her teeth and *oh oh oh!*

Beverly did not move back until they both had to breathe. She settled back on the balls of her feet and smiled. “How’s that for unspoken?” Even with the dim light he could see that there was a flush high on her cheeks.

“Bev…” he said, helpless to say anything else. “Beverly…”

“I know,” she said. “Oh God, no I don’t. I don’t know anything. But please stay the night with me. If you want. Only if you want.”

I want so many impossible things. That was a thought he had not had in a long time. When had he stopped wanting?

“I’m gonna go change clothes,” he said, slowly, because that was the only logical thing he could think to say. “Brush my teeth. You know. But then I’ll come back to your room.”

“Okay,” Beverly said, and perhaps now it was her turn to sound hesitant, enough so that he had to ask --

“Are *you* sure, Beverly? Do you want…” *Fill in the blank, there. Whatever this is, whatever we can become, are becoming.*

“It’s hard for me to tell, sometimes,” Beverly said. “But I think I do. I really think I do.”

And so Ben went up the stairs and into his room, and he washed his face in the bathroom and then he took his bag with his things and he went back down the stairs.

*

In his room, Eddie tried to shake the heavy discomfit and weariness of the whole day. Derry was cruel, and painful; he was aching with it. He undid his tie, brushed his teeth, and swallowed several of the advil tablets he had on him. In the bathroom mirror, he tried to catalogue himself by what was physically present in the reflection.

There was his face; slender, pale, and drawn. He had never really been sure whether or not he was handsome; he had been an unappealing child but women had liked him when he was in college. Not so much, any more, except of course for Myra. But perhaps that was because of his eyes, which were dark and tired. He had a steady gaze and did not smile easily. And then there was his forehead, creased by stress. Lips: thin and perpetually slightly chapped, although he applied lip balm regularly. He opened his mouth and looked at his clean white teeth (he was proud of those, at least; although right now such things seemed particularly meaningless). He raised a thumb to the slight widow’s peak of his hairline, and frowned at the patchiness of his hair. It wasn’t a fantastic state of affairs, but he had never been particularly concerned with his looks. And Myra still liked him even though he looked worn and aged and he was smaller than her.

Eddie conjured her face in his mind; when he had first met her and as she was now. He realized that she *was* pretty, with a shock that come only come from a man who married his wife not because of his attraction to her (or lack-thereof) but for -- what? Protection? Protection from his own terrible-traitorous-dangerous true attraction?

Jeez-um crow, Richie Tozier said in his head. *That's a sorry state of affairs, Eds!*

Eddie clenched his hands so tightly around the bathroom counter that he thought the dry skin of his knuckles might split open. It didn't. That even now, even here in his private fears, Richie was still there and present, was...not *disturbing,* per se, but -- what was that about?

"Don't call me Eds," he said, out loud, and then he felt stupid and absurd for talking to a voice in his head. He had snapped at Rich, earlier, told him not to touch him -- he was thinking about how Richie's eyes had gone wide, how meekly he'd recoiled -- but the anger he felt was unfair and unfounded and he knew that. It wasn't Richie's fault that he was there in Eddie's head. He always had been, since they were kids.

Eddie exhaled, slowly. He had to stop thinking about it, or he'dgo crazy, and he felt already half-there. He washed his face, and didn't look at the mirror as he dried it.

After he exchanged his trousers for pajama bottoms, Eddie sat on his bed. He took off his spectacles and folded them; he slid the rings off his fingers. He looked at his tasteful wedding band and then he looked at the ostentatious ruby ring. He looked at his hands; which now looked like a blank slate. That was good, wasn't it? He slid the smaller ring back onto his pinky finger. Now the hands belonged to him again. He needed to decide what it was that he wanted, but that was a task that seemed impossible. And, anyway… in his mind Richie said again *For tomorrow we may die.* But the morning and the aftermath felt almost equal, as absurd as that was -- a single desperate day and then the rest of his life.

*

After Ben and Beverly lay down next to each other, Beverly turned off the light and they were in darkness. At first Ben was stiff and awkward and he thought perhaps so was Beverly. They were very carefully not touching. Eventually, she laughed, a little muffled by the pillow.

“We’re ridiculous, Ben,” she whispered. “Tomorrow we all might die under the bones of this terrible town, and we’re lying here like logs.”

“I don’t mean to make you so uncomfortable. Maybe I should go.”

There was a rustling of blankets as she shifted. “Don’t...not because of this. I’m going to turn towards you,” she said it like she knew he needed the warning, which was...fair. He turned his head, and yes now the whole curve of her body was facing him.

“Give me your hand,” she said, “the scarred one.”

Without thinking, he did. She traced the silver lines with one finger, and then she pressed her own palm to his, so that their scars almost lined up. Unlike soul-marks, they weren’t exact copies of each other, but --

“We promised,” Beverly said. “Come back. Stay together. *Remember*.”

“I’m glad I remembered you, Beverly.”

“I’m glad I remembered you, too.” His eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness that when she smiled a little, he could see it. She squeezed at his hand.

“Do you want me to turn the other way?”

“No,” Ben said, shifting so that he was curved towards her, too. “It’s okay. This is good.”

And it was. They had the blankets pulled up to their chins, and after they let go of each other’s hands they remained untouching. But they faced each other. Beverly’s breathing started to even out. Eventually, when Ben closed his eyes, he found that sleep was waiting there instead of fear.

*

Richie still did not want to do it, but he had decided eventually that he simply had to. He *had* to tell Eddie, because -- everything else aside -- Eddie deserved to know, and it was probably wrong of Richie not to tell him when he had first realized it all those desperate years ago. (He could not find it in himself to fault his younger self for that, however -- *Jesus* he was just a kid and Derry was *cruel*.)

He had tried to sleep and had gotten a few winks, maybe, but his bed felt cold and his room felt too empty and he didn't remember if he had dreamt of anything, but he had woken up feeling distinctly unsettled.

Great, he thought, *so now not only do I have to go fight a clown, I'm not even gonna be able to get some god-damn rest before it.*

And of course, overwhelmingly on his mind was Eddie. Perhaps even more terrifying that facing the clown was the horrible fact that he had what he had always wanted right in front of him and he hadn't said a goddamn thing. Mike thought they were all so brave, coming back to Derry, but what they were was *desperate*; adults who grew up but not all the way…but maybe he was just projecting. He gritted his teeth. If this was going to be as life-or-death as they all, deep down, knew it was -- *then* --

*

Eddie was asleep. He was still half-dressed, slumped on top of his covers; he had not meant to fall asleep. He was dreaming, and it was not a pleasant dream.

"Eddie?" Myra said.

“Yes, darling?” he said to his wife.

In that dream-world Myra looked at him and she was kind instead of anxious or controlling.

“Eddie,” she said, “Aren’t you happy? I mean, aren’t you happy with me?”

He was, wasn’t he? But as he kept watching a cricket crawled out of the wall behind her and stole his attention away.

“Those damn things are getting everywhere,” he said, exasperated. He was not going to answer her question; a man was not supposed to lie to his wife. “I told you I’ll clean them out, and I will…they’re driving me mad.”

“What?” Myra said. She turned to look where Eddie was looking, then turned back to stare at him, her eyes wide. “What are you talking about?”

“The cricket,” he said, confused. Couldn’t she see it? “It’s right there -- right behind you, Marty. It must’ve crawled up through the basement.”

“What cricket?” she said again, and Eddie turned to look at her closely now, baffled.

Myra looked at him with her wide eyes. As he watched, her lips parted slightly -- but instead of speaking, he watched in steady horror as a cricket climbed out of her parted lips.

Eddie stumbled back away from her. His shoulder caught the edge of their refrigerator and it threw him further off balance, until without realizing what was happening, he was on the floor in front of his wife. She towered over him; taller than he knew her to be, impossibly tall.

“What?” she said. “Eddie! Are you okay?” She started to bend down, her brows pressed tight together in concern, but he couldn’t stop looking at the cricket that was climbing onto her chin, now. As she spoke it was like more of the insects bubbled up with her words; they were clamoring all over her face, climbing down to her chest and up

to her hair. She didn't seem to notice a thing. Eddie kept trying to speak, but when he opened up his mouth -- oh God he felt it in his own throat -- *the little skittering legs* -- the crickets climbed out of his parted lips.

Eddie woke to his still-lit room because his hand was curled up under his chin and the ring that he was still wearing was pressed into his flesh. He jerked his hand away, startled. The dream was fading already, but the image stayed of Myra, and himself, and himself-and-Myra; infected and infecting each other.

"Fuck," Eddie said aloud, staring at the ceiling. When the phone rang a moment later, he sat up and answered it.

*

If it was Richie that died under the town he was born in, then Eddie would know they were soulmates only because the mark on the back of his leg would fade. Richie thought that might be the worst possibility of them all, and it was what inspired him to pick up the phone and actually call the man.

He got up and dressed quickly, because he felt that perhaps this was a conversation best had in person. He had the fella at the front desk ring Eddie's room, and waited impatiently for his friend to pick up.

"Yes?" Eddie answered, eventually. He sounded groggy, and Richie said, "Oh shit, Eddie, did I wake you?"

There was silence over the line, and then Eddie said, "No...I couldn't sleep. What's going on?"

He sounded nervous, now, because of course why would Richie be calling him unless something was wrong? *Fuck!* Richie thought, but it was too late for cold feet now.

“Look,” Richie said, awkwardly. “I just want to -- to talk to you about something, alright? It’s sort of important and I want you to hear it before tomorrow. Can I come over to your room?”

Eddie paused over the line. “Alright?” He said eventually, vaguely bemused. “Well, I guess. If you think it’s important.”

“Okay,” Richie said. “Um. Okay. I’ll see you in a few,” he said, and then he hung up abruptly and cursed at himself. *What happened to all your social graces, Records Tozier?* He smiled wryly at himself. The man on the radio was not the man he really was, and that had always been the case.

Eddie opened the door as soon as Richie knocked. He looked tired, and he was wearing soft cotton pants instead of the pleated suit he had worn to dinner, although he was still half-dressed -- Richie’s eyes flitted to the ruby ring; the same ring that Pennywise had sported on his finger when he was pretending to be Eddie to hurt Richie. (Because Richie was weak, *so weak,* for Eddie, and if they were walking into the lair of the beast, he had to acknowledge that…)

He didn’t know where to fucking start. But if Eddie was still mad at him, them --

“Eddie,” Richie said awkwardly, after the door had closed behind him. “I’m sorry for calling you Eds, and all that. I don’t know what that was -- I just got caught up in the atmosphere, you know --”

“Rich,” Eddie said, cutting him off. “It’s fine. Honestly it is. Hey, let’s sit down?” Those tired eyes looked imploringly at Richie; and he was never in any universe going to be able to say no.

“Sure,” Richie said, and he sat down on the little wicker chair beside the table as Eddie sat down on the quilt on the bed.

There was a moment of long, but not awkward, silence. “To be honest,” Eddie said, voice quiet, “I didn’t really hate being called Eds.

When we were kids...I mean, it was like…it was like a comic book hero with a secret identity. And I could only be *Eds* when I was with you guys. The Losers."

He looked up; Richie remained silent. What was there to say to that? He waited for Eddie to finish.

"I liked being Eds," Eddie said. "I liked...Richie, I liked you messing with me, pinching my cheeks, all that shit -- you're an asshole but you're my friend." He smiled at Richie and Richie thought, *Jesus Christ how can anyone see that smile and not fall in love?*

"Yeah," was all he said -- all he could say. "Really?"

"Really," Eddie said. "I...look, Rich...my relationship with my wife is maybe not as good as I've pretended." He laughed a little, and then leaned over to pluck something off his bedside table. He held up the gold band.

"Myra and I aren't good for each other," he said. "That's what I've realized."

"Oh," Richie said. He'd come here to make his own confession -- this was putting him in over his head. "Shit, Eddie, I'm sorry."

Eddie shook his head. "Not your fault. I've done a lot wrong in my life, Richie."

"Me too -- we all have --"

Eddie laughed; it was joyless. "Did you marry your mother? Because that's what I did. How fucked up is that?"

Richie had nothing to say to that. If they were eleven years old, he would have leaned over and pinched Eddie's cheek, and it would have been shameless, unburdened. But he was not eleven years old anymore.

"You don't have to answer that," Eddie said. "Sorry. It's okay if you call me…whatever you want. I don't care. I can't be the man I was pretending to be with Myra anymore. I *can't.*" His voice was so strong, so upright.

“Eds?” Richie said. He hadn’t meant to say it as a question, but it came out that way.

“Yeah?” Eddie said.

If Eddie was going to offer up their childhood intimacy -- then maybe it wasn’t horrible-wrong to take it. Moving in quick bursts, Richie stood up and moved to sit beside Eddie, hitching his arm around Eddie’s neck in a playful, childish faux-headlock. “Eds!” he crowed, laughing.

“What the fuck, Rich! Back off!” but Eddie was laughing as he untangled himself from Richie’s arm, his hand lingering warm and soft on Richie’s wrist.

“Nah, man,” Richie said, and for a brief wonderful moment he was not scared at all of what his love for Eddie meant or didn’t mean. “Not unless you really mean that…”

“I guess I don’t,” Eddie said, and then he startled Richie by looping his arm around Richie’s shoulders in return. “What did you want to talk about, anyway? You made it sound serious.”

Oh, fuck. There was no way around the weight of that conversation, and Richie knew Eddie must feel the way that he physically stiffened.

“I don’t know if you’ll want to hear it,” he said, because that was the most vulnerable he could make himself.

Eddie paused, and cocked his head towards Richie, going for eye contact that Richie was reluctant to give.

“I want --” Eddie said,

and then suddenly they both pulled up short, because there was --

*

-- a sharp and sudden pain, which hit like lightning and then disappeared.

*

Mike was used to working late. He had spent countless nights alone in the Derry Public Library; alone but not necessarily lonely. After so much time spent in solitude, he almost welcomed its return...almost, but not quite. He wasn't yet used to the Losers, them being there in actuality instead of in his plans, but -- he missed them, still, basically as soon as they left.

So, when the dark figure entered the library and appeared in Mike's field of vision, his first reaction was not one of fear. His first reaction was that someone had come back for him; worried that he was taking too much time in compiling his notes.

He was not *entirely* wrong. The intruder *was* looking for him.

"Hi," Henry Bowers said. That was impossible, because Henry Bowers was behind lock and key at Juniper Hill, but -- "Hey," Bowers said again, "Hey --" and then he said a very ugly word, a word that he'd been saying to Mike since they were both kids. "Time to fucking *die*, boy."

And then he came at Mike with a knife -- the same knife he'd had so long ago.

*

From where he was slumped asleep on Mike Hanlon's couch, Bill was having a dream. He would not remember it when he woke up. In it, Audra was crying, but not over her soulmate...she was crying over *him*, because of him. Bill murmured something in his sleep; he was

too old to sleep on couches and he was uncomfortable. He shifted and twitched for some time -- some time in which Audra cried or begged or worried, or was happy and sweet and held his hand -- and then he was startled awake, not by his soulmate because Audra was not his soulmate and he did not have one, but still by someone that he loved very much.

“Muh-Mikey?” he said aloud, and it frustrated him that he stuttered even to this empty house. He felt the sharp spike of pain and he did not know why he knew it was Mike but he *did*, he did know -- and suddenly his mind was afire because *Fuck that*, fuck hurting one of the Losers’ Club and getting away with it -- first Stan and now -- *No no no!*

Bill sprang up, and he left Mike’s house with one singular goal: to protect what was threatened. They were together now; that made -- *had* to make -- them unstoppable.